

Prisoner of Fate

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Prisoner of Fate

by [lightweaver](#)

Summary

Five years after Sasuke's defection from Konoha, the Akatsuki are becoming frustrated. Somehow, most of the jinchuriki have gone into hiding with Naruto, and are nowhere to be found. In an effort to draw Naruto out of hiding, and reach the other jinchuriki in the process, Sakura is taken prisoner.

Or, Itachi tries his damndest to protect Sakura while maintaining his psychopathic killer persona.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

The Involuntary Houseguest

Ostensibly, it was a fan letter praising the beautiful prose and heart-touching story of *Icha Icha Tactics*. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it.

Except for the final sentence, which made reference to a code Konoha's spymaster had used for years. A unique code for a very important informant – one whose identity even he was unaware of, the whole system having been set up by the Third Hokage.

Once Jiraiya was done decrypting the document, he cursed and immediately sped to Hokage Tower with the paper containing the important missive. Tsunade needed the message immediately.

Akatsuki impatient with trying to locate Naruto. Plan is to use bait to lure him out. Prime targets are Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura.

There were few things which were capable of shocking Uchiha Itachi, and even fewer capable of causing him fear.

The scene he walked into that day was one of them.

It was not the fact that Kisame, Sasori, Hidan, and Kakuzu were on the verge of wrecking the Amegakure base's living room. While Kisame's involvement was unexpected, since the man was usually rather easy-going, arguments among the Akatsuki were frequent, and more often than not turned violent.

It was also not that they were arguing over a prisoner's fate – Akatsuki almost never took prisoners, preferring to kill. So on the rare occasion that involuntary houseguests had to be hosted, there was usually a dispute over their fate once they had exhausted their purpose. Hidan invariably wanted to use them for his rituals and Kakuzu would want to use them for bounties or to sell them to a trafficking organization. If they were particularly powerful or aesthetically pleasing, Sasori would want to make them into puppets. Deidara usually wanted to blow them up as well, but thankfully he was a little too unconscious for this conversation.

No, what frightened Itachi was the identity of said prisoner. Jiraiya-san was usually good at acting on his intel in an effective and discreet manner, and Itachi had expected that this case would be no different.

Unfortunately, it appeared that in this instance, his warning had been too late. And now, Haruno Sakura was in the custody of the Akatsuki, bait for Uzumaki.

He had to do something. She was one of Sasuke's teammates, and would be important to bring him back to Konoha and keep him there. Itachi had gotten very good at prioritising in the ten years since his defection, and he usually managed to convince himself that he could not blow his cover by attempting to help Konoha and its allies.

But Sakura was too important to his plans for Sasuke. She needed to be saved from the plans the Akatsuki were making about what they would do with her, and she was a little too unconscious and drained of chakra to do it herself.

Quickly coming up with the bare bones of a plan, he vaulted over the overturned sofa that was blocking the door, dodged a stray fireball, and strode in to the living room. He picked up the unconscious girl bridal style. That got their attention, and silence fell. Kisame was so shocked that he even stopped his diatribe on how Samehada enjoyed the taste of her medical chakra, and that he wanted to feed it to his favoured sword.

"I will take custody of her," Itachi said calmly. "She was my little brother's teammate, and it is our objective to capture him to draw the Kyuubi in as well. I am certain that once he receives word that I have taken a *personal* interest in her, he will deliver himself to us, sparing us the trouble of locating him and dealing with Orochimaru." He allowed his gaze to linger on the girl's breasts, making his meaning clear. He felt ill at what he was implying, but there was no help for it. He had to stake a claim that the other members would respect.

The remaining four members of the Akatsuki immediately burst into protests.

"Oi, oi, Itachi-san, we can use the medical chakra for ourselves once Samehada has gotten its fill--"

"Her bounty is 100,000 ryo. We could even get a higher price if we personally sold her to an ailing rich person--"

"Jashin-sama requires sacrifice--"

"I want a puppet capable of her precision chakra controls--"

Itachi turned back to face his comrades, and glared at all of them

coldly.

“I will interrogate her using my Mangekyo Sharingan to extract her information on the Kyuubi. Kisame-san, it does not work that way – absorbing her chakra would not allow you to heal just as absorbing mine would not allow you to create fireballs. Kakuzu-san, we can collect her bounty once she has served her purpose. Hidan-san, Jashin-sama does not require specific people. Sacrifice someone else. Sasori-san, I am sure that you too can live with having just 298 puppets. One less will not make a difference.” And with that said, Itachi again crossed the obstacles of the impromptu battle zone and strode up to his room, ignoring the other members’ further protests. He was right, of course, and they knew it. That, and being one of the senior members of the Akatsuki, ensured he would get his way in this matter.

Haruno Sakura was as safe as she could possibly be while a prisoner with the Akatsuki.

Now, for the impossible task of returning her safely to Konoha without blowing my cover...

First Impressions

On reaching his rooms, the first thing Itachi did was to gently place the girl on the bed, while arranging her to make it seem as if he had tossed her there with no regard for her welfare.

His next task was constructing an intricate genjutsu.

The sounds that come out will be muffled, he decided. That will make it seem as if I was careless and hasty in creating the seals. Too impatient to construct it carefully as I usually do – that should fit with what they know of me and my... level of experience. They will hear her crying and screaming at certain intervals. I will take it down tomorrow morning. To leave it up any longer would be suspicious.

Once that was done, he began furiously adding to the seals he already had in place around his rooms. Dampeners on any chakra that was not his own and more seals to prevent sounds from leaving the room. He also added more layers to the genjutsu traps that would prevent intruders. He thought about adding something to prevent the girl from leaving the room, and then decided against it. He wanted her to be capable of defending herself if she was cornered when he was not around.

Feeling immensely guilty, he also performed a particularly nasty jutsu he had picked up years ago while dealing with a rogue-nin that had a particular proclivity for kidnappings. It would ensure that his chakra acted as a leash on the girl – she would need to stay close to either him or an animal summons infused with his chakra. If she got too far, she would begin to feel quite sick. That would ensure that he would not lose track of her.

It's for her safety, he reminded himself. He would undo it as soon as it became unnecessary.

Exhausted, he then turned to survey the girl. She was not in good shape – there were a few angry burns on her arms, courtesy of Deidara, he supposed. It spoke to her skill that she did not appear to have sustained burns anywhere else. He decided that it was a good thing he had added the chakra leash – he would not put it past her to be capable of disabling his seals and traps and making her way out.

He also noted the distinct lack of cuts and scratches that would indicate hits from Sasori's projectiles.

An expert at dodging, it appears.

There was only one thin cut on her cheek. That must have been the one that knocked her unconscious. He assumed Sasori had used the projectiles laced with non-lethal poisons.

Though if he didn't, there isn't anything I can do about it. I am many things, but a healer is not one of them.

While she appeared to be clear of wounds inflicted by his comrades, her body was littered with abrasions and bruises. He sighed. This was going to be more difficult than he thought. All his instincts were screaming for him to tend to the kunoichi and clean her wounds. Reason reminded him that a psychopath would not care.

He compromised by placing some water and clean cloth on the table next to his bed. He could demand that she tend to herself when she awoke. Yes, that was a good plan. He left the ointment in his drawer. A hardened S-class criminal would not care about whether her wounds became infected.

Once done, he settled himself on the floor and waited patiently for the kunoichi to regain consciousness.

She was lying on something soft, and she was warm. It even smelled wonderful, reminiscent of a blazing fire in the middle of a cold forest.

Her entire body felt heavy and exhausted, as if begging her to stay in that heavenly place just a while longer. With the self-discipline she had drilled into herself, Sakura forced her eyelids open.

And saw Sasuke staring right at her.

She shivered. How long had she dreamed of him gazing at her so intensely? "S-Sasuke-kun?" she whispered, hating how dry and scratchy her voice sounded. What had *happened* to her?

Sasuke did not respond. His eyes narrowed, and she could swear the temperature in the room dropped by about twenty degrees. And then she realised. His Sharingan... it looked different. It had never had that... pinwheel pattern before...

And then, she was flooded with memories. She'd been in a little town between Iwa and Konoha, she recalled. She had been on her way back to Konoha after completing a solo mission. She'd been enjoying a nice

dinner when she was attacked.

She had to run and dodge as she desperately tried to get away from that blonde freak who had *mouths* on his hands that spat out beautifully shaped explosive clay. She'd had to punch out the clay birds before they exploded on their own. They still burned her arms, of course, but she'd managed to push out most of the chakra that made them such a threat. She probably would have been better off focusing on fleeing, but she had not wanted any innocent bystanders to be hurt. And all the while, the blonde coward had stayed up in the sky launching pretty grenades instead of landing and facing her in a proper fight where she could have kicked his ass.

And just after she'd finally managed to get within range and knock him out with a good seizure-inducing jutsu, she had run into that hunchbacked Akatsuki member. Only he hadn't really been a hunchback – a couple of good punches had shattered the outer shell, and revealed a handsome redhead who could not have been much older than herself. She'd just been ready to level another punch at that pretty face when the tail from the outer shell she'd thought she had already dealt with sprung open, launching a flurry of senbon at her. And she had *almost* managed to get out of the way, but she had not been fast enough. One of them had grazed her cheek.

And then... nothing. Until she woke up in this comfortable bed that was turning her stupid with how good it smelled.

By a process of deduction, the man in front of her was not Sasuke. He had to be...

"Uchiha Itachi," she whispered in horror.

She immediately checked her mental traps, which she had crafted with Ino's help. She knew too much – far too much. If he managed to rummage around inside her head with that Mangekyō Sharingan, all of that precious information would belong to the Akatsuki. She almost sighed in relief at finding Inner Sakura in the exact same state she had left her in. They had not even tried to get the information. The secrets in her mind were safe. Her mind then turned to more immediate matters.

Why was she here? Why wasn't she already dead?

The man stood. His gaze never left her eyes. "You have full use of these rooms," he said finally, in a voice colder than ice. "Anything that you can access, you may use. Do not attempt to leave. It will not

be pleasant.” He nodded to a basin of water and some snowy white cloths next to her – no, *the* bed. “Clean yourself up.”

And with that, he turned as if to leave.

That was it?

“Wait!” she cried, hating herself for how pathetic she must sound. But knowledge was precious, no matter how it was gained. “Why am I here?” *Why am I still alive?*

He looked at her again with that expressionless gaze, and turned to leave again. Just as she was screwing up the courage to demand answers, he said a single sentence.

“You are bait.”

And then, the door opened and closed and he was gone.

Fifteen minutes later, Sakura was fuming.

“You may use anything within these rooms,” she growled. “Way to make it sound like there’s anything here to even use!”

Okay, she was being unfair. There were a lot of supplies. All the facilities needed for everyday living worked perfectly, and the water was deliciously warm. She could not wait to jump in to the shower and get rid of all the grime on her body.

If only she had clothes to change into.

Which begged another question: where the hell was her pack? She had initially hoped that it would be somewhere in the room, but it was nowhere to be found, even after she had scoured the large, comfortable bedroom and the attached bathroom. She supposed she could just wear Uchiha Itachi’s clothes – and serve him right if she returned them to him all dirty and torn – but it was not like he would have *undergarments* for her to change into. She might not be very well endowed, but still.

And she knew she was hyper-fixating on her modesty to avoid the issue of being *captured by the Akatsuki and her notes being gone, possibly in their hands and would they break her encryption and get access to her work and ruin all of Konoha’s advantages against them and what was going to happen to her and how the hell was she even going to get out of*

here and get home –

She forced herself to breathe and reminded herself of her own shinobi rules. *It is okay to feel and display emotion, but I will not be ruled by them. My mind will have command in any situation.*

It was much better than the commandments that ordered shinobi to be emotionless chunks of rock. Denying one's true nature never accomplished much.

Okay Sakura, one problem at a time. First step: assess your physical health.

She had quickly regained some strength and the ability to move around, making her suspect that the senbon that pierced her had been laced with some sort of sedative. Once the effects had worn off, she had regained almost full use of her body, apart from some lingering drowsiness.

Her chakra was completely drained, however. Although she'd been forced to open up her reserves and had used most of it during her fight against the blonde, there should still have been a good level left at the end of her fight with the puppeteer. And she should have been able to recover some while unconscious. Which meant they had some means of draining her chakra.

She would need to find a way to conserve chakra for any escape attempts. She doubted that the Akatsuki would feed her well enough, or that she would be allowed to sleep long enough to rebuild her chakra reserves enough to become a threat to them.

So healing her various scrapes was out of the question. They would have to heal the old-fashioned way.

No pack meant no ration bars. No nutrition meant her strength would only wane. She would have to conserve her energy and avoid anything too strenuous. She frowned. Could she perhaps persuade Uchiha Itachi to feed her?

What would it take to even persuade a heartless murderer anyway?

She did not want to think too deeply on that. Anyway, that was a problem to be dealt with later. First, she would get herself clean. She decided against using the water and cloth he'd provided – who knew if it was laced with anything that would weaken her even further?

She smirked. He clearly had not expected her to be able to immediately drag herself over to the shower. He underestimated her, and he underestimated how quickly she recovered. It would serve her well.

Okay. Next step was clothing herself. She took out a shirt and pair of pants from the cupboard – she mentally snickered at how literally every piece of clothing the man owned was identical – and frowned.

She could do it, but did she really want to provoke him that way?

After a few minutes' deliberation, she shrugged. The alternative was to either walk around without bindings or to continue wearing her current set, which were terribly grimy.

She would rather face an angry Uchiha Itachi. And anyway, it could be her own petty form of revenge. And the best part was, she did not even need to use her chakra to enhance her strength – there was a *fully stocked sewing kit* in the drawers. Clearly, he believed in having everything he could possibly need on hand.

Smiling gleefully, she began using the scissors to cut up one of his amazingly soft and comfortable shirts into strips.

Itachi expected many things when he stepped into his room.

He thought he might find her weeping in the same place he had left her. Or glaring defiantly at the door. He thought she might lunge at him and attempt to overpower him in an impulsive attempt to escape. Or scream at him for holding her prisoner. The times he had been close enough to Team 7 to keep an eye on Sasuke had not left him with a very high opinion of Haruno Sakura.

He had not expected to find her sitting peacefully on the floor. She appeared to be meditating. And... his eyes narrowed. Her hair was wet. And those were his clothes. And that was his sewing kit on the desk. With all the supplies she had used carelessly strewn over the table.

His left eye twitched.

He also noted the various drawers that had not been closed fully. Clearly, she had gone exploring, and did not mind him knowing it. Any self-respecting ninja would be capable of hiding their traces, and she had chosen not to do so. He scowled. He had not expected the

kunoichi to be this calm, or this bold.

He removed the masks on his chakra to announce his presence and stepped into the room. Her eyes opened, but did not meet his. They were angled towards his torso. To anyone else's eyes, her posture would appear to still be relaxed. It was only the Sharingan which allowed him to pick up on her tensed muscles, and the minute movements she made as she drew herself up. She was ready to spring into action at the smallest opening. He approved. It appeared she had some instincts that would allow her to survive in hostile territory.

"Uchiha-san," she greeted him. At the sight of the plate he was holding, her eyes widened before settling back into a calm mask. Hmm. She was able to make a decent effort at hiding her emotions. And it seemed she was trying to act cooperative. He held back a sigh. Now he would have to maintain vigilance for an escape attempt later, when he really had hoped to get the whole "breaking any ideas of escaping" thing over with.

"Dinner," he said tonelessly, placing it on the table next to the bed. He had initially planned on placing it on his desk but clearly, that was not going to be possible. He could not show any sign of humanity in front of the kunoichi, and that included just how much the mess bothered him. He would just have to tidy it later when she was asleep.

"Uchiha-san," she said tentatively. "May I ask – do you have any idea where my things are? My pack, I mean."

"No," he replied. Short, terse sentences. Those had served him well over the years.

"Could you... could you maybe try to find out? Maybe from those freaks that captured me..." her voice oddly breathy. He turned to regard her fully, suspicions aroused. If she spoke another sentence, he could confirm his observation.

A flush rose in her cheeks. She smiled shyly, and bit her lower lip deliberately. "Please, Uchiha-san? I'd be really indebted to you."

He was right. She was trying to use her feminine wiles on him. To get her *pack*, of all things. What weapons could she possibly have concealed there that would drive her to such lengths? And was she really so unimaginative that she could not have managed an escape attempt without it? He'd placed five different items that any shinobi could improvise as a weapon around the room.

Still. It was intriguing.

“Oh?” he asked, raising a single eyebrow.

Her head ducked a little, presumably to add to the shy act while keeping her eyes away from looking into his Sharingan. Maybe she was just biding her time before using the weapons she had surely found.

She sashayed toward him. Really, it was impressive how she managed to sway her hips so much while still maintaining that innocent façade. She coyly placed one hand on his shoulder, and stroked it. “Yes,” she said breathily. “I’m sure we can work something out, Uchiha-san.”

He decided that he had allowed her to invade his personal space enough. In a flash, she was pinned against the wall, a kunai against her throat.

“Let me make something clear, kunoichi,” he whispered in his most menacing voice. “You are in no position to be making bargains or demands. You continue to live, and to be untouched, under my sufferance. *Do not test my patience.*” With his last few words, he allowed her to feel his chakra fully, imbued with killing intent. She gulped, but to her credit, gave only a shaky nod in response. He released her, satisfied that his meaning had been made clear, and then strode over to his bed. Perhaps if he pretended to sleep, he would not have to deal with her for the rest of the night.

As he lay down, she gasped. “Wait – you’re – sleeping here?” Bold indeed, to continue asking questions after the threat he’d just given her.

He wondered about using Tsukuyomi, and immediately discarded the idea. He hated using it, and besides, her spirit needed to be as whole and unbroken as possible if she was going to guide Sasuke back to Konoha. Already, the depths to which his brother had sunk in his hatred were troubling.

“Yes,” he replied evenly. “This is *my* room, and *my* bed, kunoichi. If your sensibilities are offended, you may sleep on the floor. I care nothing for your modesty.” *I’m so sorry. I can’t justify letting you have the bed. I can’t justify caring for your comfort in any way.*

And with that, he closed his eyes and prayed she would stop bothering him. His nerves were already frayed. This plan was going to take a lot out of him, he realised. Over the years, he had come to truly treasure

the solitude he found in his rooms, the chance to be just Itachi instead of clan-killer and S-class missing-nin Uchiha Itachi. But now, it appeared he would have to maintain that persona all day, every day.

The sooner he could get her safely back to Konoha, the better.

Plots and Plans

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura deliberated.

His breathing was far too even and regular. He was pretending to sleep. She wouldn't have thought she was *that* annoying. It was interesting though, that he would feign sleep rather than torture her into submission, especially after the threat he had just made.

And she was being given food. That was unexpected as well.

She shoved the sewing supplies she had left on the desk to the side, and brought the plate over. She chewed mechanically, her thoughts racing. Clearly, he wanted to keep her in good physical condition for some reason or the other. Could he be after the bounty on her? She fetched the highest price when she was still capable of healing, after all.

Despite her previous thoughts, she realised that escape was out of the question. She had found a number of tools that could easily become weapons during her search of his rooms. Uchiha Itachi was many things, but she could already tell from how absurdly neatly his things were arranged that he was not a careless man. If those tools had been left for her to find, he was expecting her to use them. Evidently, he thought he could subdue any escape attempts with ease. Maybe he was even trying to provoke her into trying one so he could show her just how much she was under his power.

She did not allow herself the illusion that she would be rescued, either. She was no jinchuriki, or a bearer of a kekkei genkai. Her greatest asset was in her medical ninjutsu, but Konoha had Tsunade-shishou for that. She knew she was valuable, but could not deny that they could always train more medic-nins. And while her research would undoubtedly give Konoha many advantages in the conflict against the Akatsuki, it did not make sense to sacrifice current assets for potential benefits.

In any case, even if the affection her precious people held for her prevailed over common sense, how were they to attack what was presumably the Akatsuki stronghold in the hopes of a rescue? They

would lose far more people, and without a guarantee that she would be saved. Only Naruto would be so reckless and impulsive to even consider it.

Itachi had also helpfully informed her that she was to be bait. For Naruto, she presumed. It wasn't as if the Akatsuki would be after her cat. That meant she was going to be held for an indefinite period of time, especially since Naruto was safely ensconced on Mount Myōboku, along with all the other jinchuriki Konoha had managed to persuade to take shelter there. Unless the Akatsuki somehow got their hands on a summoning contract with the toads, they would be quite safe. Even finding out where he was would not help them.

So the top priority was to figure out a way to contact her shishou and inform her that Naruto was not to find out about her kidnapping under any circumstances. That would be managed easily enough once she built up enough chakra to summon Katsuyu-sama. She wished she could use a reverse summons to get herself out of the situation, but she was no Sage. She would not survive the journey through Shikkotsu Woods, which was far too dangerous territory for those who lacked the ability to create senjutsu chakra.

I'll be stuck here for a long time, but not indefinitely. Eventually, they'll realise that the plan isn't working and Naruto isn't biting. Then, they'll dispose of me.

Her next priority, then, would need to be to ensure she could die instantly when the time came. There were too many ways that she could be used against Konoha, even against her will. *I'll need to make sure I don't get cut off from my chakra. As long as I can have it, I can use a burst of chakra to stop my heart. It'll be quick and painless.*

She would need to figure out exactly how they were draining her chakra, and if it would affect her reserves. She'd already started building those back up earlier with some meditation, but it would all be for naught if they could drain that as easily as they'd drained her normal supply.

Sakura tried not to think about the fact that this was it. This would be the end of her life. Uchiha Itachi would probably be the last person she ever interacted with.

At least Dad is long gone. I can see him again. Mom's heart will break, though.

I'm sorry Mom. I'm sorry for leaving you all alone.

I wish I could eat ramen with Naruto and Kakashi-sensei one last time. And have a sleepover with Ino-Pig. And one last spar with Shishou. I wish I could have just had one kiss with Sasuke-kun...

The tears flowed. She gave up on stopping them, no longer caring about the missing-nin who could undoubtedly hear her. She allowed herself to grieve for the life she had dreamed of, and which would be forever denied to her.

All I can do is make sure that my death isn't in vain. Even if I am lost to Konoha, I'm going to make sure they are as ready for a confrontation with the Akatsuki as I can make them.

On awakening, Itachi found the room quiet, a state for which he was thankful.

Her quiet sobs had continued for quite some time, and each sob had been a blow to him. He knew that he could hardly have stopped Akatsuki from taking her, and that he was doing his best to keep her safe. But he could not deny the guilt that ate at him for his role in destroying yet another life. He just hoped that the effects would not be permanent. That she would still have the spark that led her to be so bold when she eventually returned to Konoha.

That guilt had been replaced by irritation when he opened his cupboard and realised that one of his shirts was unaccounted for. All his clothes were hung neatly in sets, and he always removed them in sets. So, the missing shirt must be caused by her.

And then, he had walked into the bathroom and found her damp clothing hanging on every available surface. Really, some people had no respect for others' personal spaces. Or no sense of cleanliness whatsoever. He reminded himself that she had no real reason to be considerate of those keeping her prisoner, but it still irked him.

Despite the mess, a warm shower did wonders for his mood. He felt almost kind as he stepped back out and regarded the kunoichi passed out at the desk. This time, he listened to the urge that told him to carry her to the bed. He could just pretend he needed the desk. Absently, he threw the blanket over her in a manner that appeared careless while still giving her some measure of warmth. Glancing back to the desk, he realised that the sewing kit which had given him so much grief had been cleared away. He decided for his sanity's sake not to check if she had returned it to its designated place in proper condition.

She'd found a new notebook from his stash of stationeries. Curiously, he flicked through it. She'd had a busy night. Half of the notebook had been filled with her messy scrawl. He almost set aside the book with disgust at her emotional writings before one of the drawings he assumed were doodles caught his eye. That was odd. Among the mass of scribbles, he picked out what looked like an output modifier – a common element in seal construction. Why would she choose to doodle something so technical?

He immediately examined the other drawings, and found that they were all seal diagrams that had been disguised with the addition of various irrelevant lines.

A smile spread slowly across his face, previous annoyance forgotten, as he realised the sheer genius of her encryption. Due to her age, it would not even be suspect for her to carry around a notebook full of her pining for various men. Her drawings had been quite cleverly incorporated as well – she had managed to disguise them as vague doodles instead of the precise diagrams that they were. And although it was probably unintentional, the tears that smudged her writing also contributed to the illusion of a foolish, lovesick girl's diary.

He decided that the other things he had wanted to see to that morning could wait a while. He wanted to match wits with the obviously intelligent kunoichi, whose cunning had almost made him dismiss her abilities. Wryly, he thought of how just half a day ago he had been thinking of her as a helpless girl who could not care for herself. Now he knew. He would need to be especially careful around her. Someone capable of hiding their capabilities in this way would not miss much.

Studying her notebook, he applied himself to the task of breaking her encryption.

Two hours later, Itachi found himself completely impressed by Sakura. Decrypting her writings had immersed him in the way that most games and logic puzzles had failed to in recent years.

And the contents of the notebook were equally awe-inspiring. It appeared to be an attempt to reconstruct her journal. It detailed the various experiments she had conducted on the properties of chakra inks and seal construction and her general findings, even though she was unable to recall specific data. She had also written down much of her reference texts – and all from memory, it appeared.

Was this what she had been so concerned about her pack for? Not

items to aid in an escape, but to regain access to her life's work?

Itachi decided that he would do his utmost to retrieve her items. Not for her sake, but merely because it had been so long since he had felt intellectually stimulated in this way. He *wanted* to know the data she had found. He wanted to understand why a medic-nin was conducting studies into the theoretical nature of chakra.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he summoned one of his crows to stand watch over her, and to prevent her from falling ill if he needed to leave the base. He also applied a genjutsu that would activate when anyone looked at her. Just in case. Itachi had not survived ten years as a missing-nin by being careless.

He then went to look for Sasori and Deidara. They would know if her belongings were salvageable.

Sakura was in the middle of a peaceful and surprisingly dreamless sleep when she heard voices. She immediately shot awake. Her chakra levels had replenished a little, but they were nowhere near where they should be after a meal and a good night's sleep. Nevertheless, there was enough for what she needed now.

She channeled chakra to her ears, allowing her to easily hear the conversation going on outside the door.

“- just glad he recast the seals on his room, un. I was getting tired of hearing the screaming and crying.” She recognised this voice as that of the blonde freak.

“I should have just fought that asshole for her. All this fucking suffering, and it's not even being offered to Jashin-sama!”

“Ha! As if you could take on Itachi,” the blonde freak scoffed. “You may be immortal, but you're no match for that Sharingan, un. He'll have you screaming your lungs out just like the girl, yeah.” At that point, the voices trailed away. She assumed the two men had gone beyond the range of even her enhanced ears.

Allowing her chakra to return to normal, she frowned. She had certainly been crying last night, but she had not screamed even once. And she'd been doing her best to muffle her sobs – they would have needed to be leaning against the door or in the room to be able to hear it.

While Itachi had certainly done something to slow her recovery of chakra, at the moment, he was still allowing her to build it back up. She could attribute that to his arrogance that he could handle her. Or maybe he was planning to drain it later.

But he had not tortured her as she had expected, and had even given her decent food. And – she was in the bed, when she had fallen asleep at his desk. He had even bothered to throw the blanket over her. Was he trying to lull her into a false sense of security so she might let some information about Naruto's location slip?

Or maybe he wanted to build her goodwill towards him so that she would be manipulated into helping them find Naruto. Or maybe agree to heal his eyes. The strain from using the Sharingan must be taking its toll on him.

And yet, she could not deny that he had apparently done something to make the other Akatsuki members think he had hurt her rather viciously, when he had not laid a finger on her. He was deceiving his own comrades.

Why?

Chapter End Notes

I always thought it was a pity that Sakura's mind was never explored more in canon, and that she would have made a pretty brilliant scientist. So watch me indulge my fantasies of Scientist! Sakura.

Thanks for all the reviews guys! It really made me happy to know that you guys are already enjoying the story, and I really hope you enjoy this chapter too!

Suspicion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tsunade stood at her window, waiting for news.

It was irrational, she knew. The tracking squad had been dispatched mere hours ago, and it was at least two days' journey at top speed to Sakura's last known location. She should be focusing her efforts on managing the coordination with the other Hidden Villages. If Akatsuki had moved in on Naruto's loved ones, they would surely move in on the other jinchuriki's loved ones as well. Gaara's siblings, especially, would be targets.

Yet, she handed that task off to Jiraiya while she stood at her window like a fool, and prayed that the intelligence they had received from the Third Hokage's agent was not too late. That her apprentice, whom she considered to be like a daughter to her, would return safely to Konoha without any contact with the Akatsuki.

If there's any kindness and fortune in the world. Please, just let her be alright. I won't ever push my paperwork onto her again. Hell, I'll even give up drinking. Please, just let Sakura come home.

One frustrating conversation with Sasori later, Itachi was heading out of the Ame base. Sasori had informed him frostily that his assigned task had been to retrieve the girl, and that bothering with her belongings was a waste of time and would have certainly delayed him.

He must have really wanted to make her into a puppet.

At least he had managed to get the location of the ambush out of the man. Perhaps he would be able to find something there.

As he was about to proceed into the twisting underground passage that led to Ame's streets, he paused. A paper butterfly was hovering in front of him. He bit back a growl of frustration. He had been hoping to delay this conversation, but it appeared that would no longer be possible. Turning, he proceeded to Pain's quarters to see what the supposed leader of the Akatsuki wanted with him.

On entering Pain's quarters, Itachi inclined his head in a show of

respect and waited. Surprisingly, the masked man who called himself Tobi was not present, a fact for which Itachi was thankful. Dealing with Pain and Konan alone would still be akin to walking across a minefield.

“Itachi,” Pain greeted him. “We understand you have taken custody of the girl.”

He nodded.

“Why? Capturing the hostage was Sasori and Deidara’s task. By that logic, they should have been the ones to secure her as well.”

Itachi watched Konan for any cues as to their thoughts. There was no use watching Pain – he had concluded a while ago that the body Pain presented was not his own, and was instead a substitute controlled by chakra rods. The body would only convey what the controller wanted to convey. At least he knew that Pain was not controlled by Tobi – the chakra signatures were far too different.

“Deidara allowed himself to be defeated. Sasori lost sight of the objective, and wanted to make the girl into a puppet. Simply taking her in broad daylight will not allow her purpose to be fulfilled. They failed the mission, and so I stepped in.”

“You question Leader-sama’s plan?” Konan asked coldly.

“I question Sasori and Deidara’s execution of the plan. Sasori informed me of the location where they picked up the girl, and it is a small town. It will take weeks, if not months, for the news to spread. They also left behind the girl’s items. From my interrogation of her, it appears that they may contain valuable information. She was quite worried about us perusing them.”

Pain nodded impassively, conceding the point to Itachi. He must know that the job had been botched by Deidara’s impulsiveness and Sasori’s impatience as well. Konoha would be alerted by Sakura’s disappearance, but they would be careful not to reveal her disappearance to their reckless jinchuriki. No, the plan relied on the channels of communication between the other Hidden Villages and *their* jinchuriki. In keeping the jinchuriki apprised of Akatsuki’s current movements, the information about Sakura’s capture would eventually be leaked to Uzumaki.

At least he had more time to figure out how he would get Sakura out without arousing suspicions of his having helped her.

“Then you are taking over? You were *quite* opposed to the plan from the beginning.”

“Yes,” Itachi said smoothly, “for I did not believe our members have the patience to carry out such a plan, and recent events have only proven my point. Already, if I had not interfered, they would have believed the task ended with the girl’s retrieval and she would be long sold off for bounty or sacrificed in some ritual. We need her alive. The kyuubi jinchuriki may be reckless, but he is no fool.” Hopefully that was enough to allay Pein’s suspicions. It was unclear how much Tobi knew of his true allegiances, and he was constantly on alert for any indication that Tobi’s knowledge had been relayed to Pain.

“Then what are your plans?”

“Still unformed. But we must find a way to flaunt that the girl is in our custody. For that, we will need to escort her out of the base. And to that end, I am in the process of breaking her spirit.”

Pain nodded. “Very well. I will assign Tobi to assist in the task –“

“No.” The ferocity with which he had bit out that word shocked even Itachi. There was no use regretting his sudden explosion of emotion, however. He had committed, however inadvertently, and he had to see this through.

Konan’s eyes blazed, and even Pain’s expressionless mask twisted.

“You question orders?” Pain asked quietly.

Dangerous, this was a dangerous game he was playing. The ridiculous personality Tobi liked to exhibit was hardly anyone’s idea of an expert in torture or interrogation. They might already know he was trying to protect Sakura, and he had now painted an even greater target on her back by displaying this level of interest in her.

Part of him was tempted to give up and just let them have her. She would simply be another innocent whom he would have failed to save. But the larger part of him disagreed. She had acted fearless despite knowing his reputation, knowing the stories Konoha must tell about him. She still tried to outwit him and gain advantages in her powerless situation. She was braver and more cunning than he had given her credit for. He could not allow his home to lose an asset like her. He had to salvage this somehow.

“I have begun the process already,” Itachi said in a cold voice,

regaining his composure. "To allow interference from any other would set me back, and I cannot trust to the competence of anyone else. Especially not when I need her to be compliant enough to heal my eyes."

Accept it, he willed silently. Accept that rationale I have given. Accept that my interest in her is merely her potential use to me.

"Very well," Pain said finally, after exchanging a glance with Konan. "You may retain primary control over her. But I must insist that you accept assistance, Itachi. You have tasks and missions of your own that I will not allow you to delegate, and she cannot be left unwatched. You were on your way to collect her belongings, were you not?"

"I have taken precautions," Itachi said simply. "I may not be there, but she is still under my oversight."

Pain's eyes narrowed, and met his. A challenge of dominance. Only a wielder of the Rinnegan would dare meet his eyes in this way. "That is not sufficient. You may name your partner for this task, or you will accept the one I assign to you."

Itachi considered. Normally, he would not have hesitated to name Kisame. But his usual partner was too perceptive, and too familiar with how victims of Itachi's brand of torture behaved. He would know that Sakura had been unharmed. And besides, Samehada would be easily able to sense Sakura's growing chakra levels, regardless of her skill with masking them. No, he would not be able to leave her capable of escaping or defending herself if Kisame was his partner.

"Konan-san, you are impartial and able to focus on mission objectives. You will not interfere with my plans simply to assert your power. I will accept your assistance if you are willing to render it," he said finally. "And if you are willing to release her for this task, Leader-sama."

Konan's eyebrows moved up by a fraction, and she again exchanged glances with Pain. She nodded.

"You have been given a great amount of leeway, Itachi," Pain said. "No other member would be allowed to seize control of our plans in this way. I will release Konan to assist you as you have requested. I also expect a briefing on your specific plans soon. If this mission experiences any further failures or setbacks, *you will accept full responsibility*. Is that clear?"

Itachi inclined his head, displaying a calmness quite at odds with the storm raging within him. “Understood, Leader-sama.” He turned to Konan. “Konan-san, the girl was asleep when I left. You can proceed to my quarters to watch her.” As Konan nodded, he turned and left. She would not be able to make it through his traps, of course. He would pretend he had forgotten to grant her access, and Konan would pretend she believed him. Such were the games that were almost normal in the constant power struggle amongst the members of Akatsuki.

He sincerely regretted indulging his curiosity to go after Sakura’s things, but he could not backtrack now, not after Pain was aware of his purpose in leaving. He would simply need to return as quickly as possible.

Sakura didn’t know how she had missed the fact that there was a freaking *crow* in the room.

And it had red eyes too.

She’d flapped her arms at it and tried to shoo it away, even while knowing it was pointless since the only window was closed and sealed. Nothing. It had not even reacted. It just stared at her from its perch on the top of the cupboard. She deliberated throwing something at it, but then decided against it. It was not like she or the crow could leave, and she did not want Uchiha Itachi’s demon crow angry with her. It was probably trained in pecking out people’s eyeballs. And eating their intestines.

Actually... Was she really unable to leave?

Feeling like the world’s greatest idiot for not trying this earlier, she twisted the door knob. Locked. Of course. Now, she just felt like an idiot for doubting he would have left it unlocked.

She frowned. Could she find a way to convince him she was trustworthy enough to take her outside? If she could scope out the area, maybe she could find a way to escape –

She forced herself to breathe deeply, and reminded herself that escape was out of the question. She had the freedom to move about Itachi’s room and use his things, and she was being allowed to rebuild her chakra. She could use that to get information to Konoha. If she tried to escape and it didn’t work, she had no doubt she’d be thrown into some dungeon to rot, with chakra restraints to boot. Itachi did not

seem like a very forgiving person.

It was difficult. Ever since she had made her resolve to stop looking at Naruto's and Sasuke's backs all the damn time, she had never stopped fighting. To accept that fighting was not the answer now... it made her feel weak. Like she was back to being that silly girl who cared more about whether her hair was pretty and if she smelled nice than about being strong enough to protect others.

She repeated her mantra. *I will not be ruled by emotion. My mind will have command in any situation.* She had to keep reminding herself that she was finding ways to fight back. She was being strategic. She was prioritising plans that had any chance of success.

It did not stop her from feeling like a coward.

She took another deep breath, and forced herself to examine the room. Her search the day prior had been focused on what was in the room, and what supplies Itachi had deigned to allow her access to. Now that she had built up enough chakra, she inspected the room's defenses, while trying to avoid looking at the demon crow.

Her first search through the room yielded nothing – not even when she moved the huge cupboard away from the walls (That damned crow didn't even flinch!), or lifted up the queen-sized bed to check the flooring. She doubted there would be anything there, since she couldn't exactly picture Uchiha Itachi wiggling under the bed to paste seals, but it was still disheartening.

Her second pass through the room used chakra. She was hardly a sensory type, and she was not equipped with a doujutsu like the Byakugan. But Sakura had ways and means of overcoming her natural limitations. This technique was one she had adapted from one of Tsunade's healing techniques.

While most people knew that individuals had unique chakra signatures, they did not know why. Medic-nins knew that chakra was energy, and like all forms of energy, chakra was emitted in waves that had different frequencies and amplitudes. Using jutsus involved shaping the innate chakra that already existed within each individual. It was why certain people had preferences for certain chakra natures – it really depended on how closely a person's innate chakra matched the particular chakra nature they were trying to use.

That was part of the difficulty with mastering medical ninjitsu – you needed to have the chakra control to shape and match your chakra

waves to those of the patient. If not, the body would interpret it as foreign, and reject it, possibly causing the patient even more harm.

Sakura had honed the technique for matching chakra resonances to create her own sensing technique. She had learned to emit a low level of chakra into her surroundings, and to detect the repulsion between chakra of different resonances. The repulsions were often subtle, of course, but being able to pick up on those subtleties could mean the difference between life and death for a patient. Her range was not very developed yet – she could only focus her chakra a metre away from her body at the moment – but it worked well enough for searching areas for potential traps. What was developed, however, was her sensitivity to detect even minute differences and the ability to interpret the repulsions and detect characteristics of the chakra.

Sure enough, she felt the fuzzy patches on the walls that indicated some kind of genjutsu. Dispelling it took a lot of effort. Either Uchiha Itachi was every bit the genius he had been described as, or he *really* had not wanted anyone finding what was hidden under the genjutsu. Once dispelled, she found multiple seals.

One was a standard one to prevent any sound from leaving the room, and it appeared that he had added to it to strengthen it. She frowned, deep in thought. All the more that nobody should have been able to hear her crying the night before. She was becoming more and more convinced that for some reason, Itachi had cast a genjutsu to make the rest of the Akatsuki believe she had been tortured. Why, though, was something she was still unable to come up with an explanation with, except for the ludicrous idea that he was a secret agent spying on the Akatsuki and that he was trying to protect her until he could smuggle her back to Konoha.

She really needed to reign her imagination in.

She moved on to the other seals. The next one she found had something to do with chakra. She studied it intently. There was a drop of blood on it, which indicated that it had been personalised somehow – probably keyed to Itachi himself. There were several symbols that were unfamiliar to her, but best she could guess, this seal was the one affecting her chakra. She'd come back to it later.

The rest of the seals were fairly standard ones as well. A locking seal that prevented those who did not have a physical key from entering or leaving the room, alerts for any nearby movements, and a seal to regulate the temperature and humidity of the room. She regarded the

last one with amusement. It appeared someone was really fussy about their surroundings.

She did not find much else of interest in the room, except a large concentration of chakra on the door which was dissipating. The strange thing was that all the chakra was concentrated on the other side of the door. There was basically nothing on this side. He had trapped the outside, but not the inside. Why was he more concerned about someone entering his quarters uninvited than he was about keeping his prisoner in?

She decided that she *really* did not want to think about how much worse the other Akatsuki members must be than him if he needed to take so many precautions against them. She returned to the chakra seal that had puzzled her. She copied it down into her notebook best as she could, and flopped down onto the bed to study it.

And then, she heard a key twisting in the door. He was back. She shoved the notebook and pen under a pillow, and sat upright.

Only for a woman with blue hair and cold eyes to enter the room.

While he ran, Itachi thought.

Retrieving Sakura's pack had been a simple enough task – the town was only a couple of hours away at his speed, and it had been an easy matter to find the inn that had housed a guest with pink hair one day prior. It helped that said guest had gained a reputation as a fearsome fighter.

Fortunately, the inn seemed to have escaped the structural damage suffered by the eating establishments just down the street, and the proprietor had been more than willing to hand over Sakura's things once Itachi settled the tab.

He'd also taken a few extra minutes to examine the scene of Sakura's battle with Sasori and Deidara. In spite of himself, he was impressed. He knew what a place looked like when Deidara was done with it, and the fact that the buildings were still standing and that the damage had been contained to such a small radius was a testament to the fight the kunoichi had put up. He'd also heard some of the townspeople speaking with awe of the pink-haired demon who had somehow managed to create a shelter in the ground for the bystanders with just her fists, all while punching out the projectiles Deidara had been flinging at her.

Clearly, Sakura would be a fearsome opponent. Could he instead make her into an ally? Now that Pain was watching him closely, it would be safer if she could put up a pretence that she really was under his control. Controlling her actions with genjutsu was still an option, but it would require far too much concentration to maintain a genjutsu that would somehow convince Sakura that she needed to pretend to be broken to Itachi's will.

If he could convince her, the plan would work. His vague ideas to Pain on how he would need to show Sakura out and about and under Akatsuki's control would give him an excuse to take the girl out of the base without provoking a fight that would risk both their lives. And so long as Tobi did not get overly interested in Itachi's plans, Pain could be convinced that Sakura would not attempt to escape. From there, he would just need to make sure to flaunt her in the right places. Then, Sasuke would come to him.

And after Itachi's death, having his teammate to care for would be the impetus to ensure the boy returned to Konoha.

He just needed to find a way to convince Sakura to play along with this plan without making her question his motives.

Sakura's patients described her as having a pleasant and compassionate bedside manner. Anyone who had to interact with her in any other capacity vehemently disagreed.

The blue haired woman would surely be part of the latter group, since the first thing Sakura did on seeing her was to blurt out rudely, "Who the hell are you?"

She had spent one night with Itachi's menacing aura for company, and now she thought she could take on the rest of the Akatsuki without issues. Sakura made a mental note to mourn her survival instincts.

The woman arched a perfect eyebrow. Seriously, did the entire Akatsuki sit around practicing that gesture? Sakura had tried to nail that expression which was the perfect combination of amusement and contempt, but her eyebrows insisted on moving in unison. Maybe the single-eyebrow-raising training was held after their manicure sessions.

"My name is Konan," the woman responded, "and it appears that you are in better health than I expected." She glanced up at the demon crow before returning her gaze to Sakura.

“Pardon me,” Sakura said slowly. “I have difficulty understanding why my health would matter to you.”

Konan stepped close to her, a gentle smile on her lips. A smile that did not reach her cold, amber eyes.

She grimaced as her hand pushed Sakura’s hair out of her face, regarding her neck. She gripped Sakura’s chin, and twisted her face this way and that. She picked up her arms, examining them critically. She dropped them, and sighed. “Forgive me, Sakura, it did not occur to me to bring any salve for you. I do not think anybody expected Itachi to be this... violent.” A pause, and then she continued. “As for your question, we are both women, are we not? After what you have been through, I do believe it would be unnatural for me to *not* care about your wellbeing.”

Oh. He had really gone to a lot of effort to make her look like she had been tortured. And raped too, based on Konan’s words. Genjutsu, probably. Now that she probed for it, she could feel the foreign chakra on top of her skin. The politics within the Akatsuki must go deep. Could she make use of this schism? How should she react?

She hesitated only for a moment, before deciding to play along. She could always find a way to expose Itachi to his comrades later if necessary. Or she could use her cooperation with his ruse as a bargaining chip.

Sakura smiled humourlessly. “He can certainly try his best to break me. But he will find it takes a lot to make me bend to somebody who wants to kill one of my best friends.” Her eyes narrowed. “That is something for you to take note of as well, *Konan*. Your false show of sympathy does not fool me.” She ignored the part of her brain that screamed at her to stop being an idiot and provoking an Akatsuki. She couldn’t even blame her sudden recklessness on Naruto’s influence, as she had not seen him for the better part of five years.

“Your loyalty does you credit,” Konan replied. She appeared unfazed by Sakura’s calling her out. “As does your strength of will. I do not hold your words against you, as I know you have no reason to trust me. Not after what you have been through at Itachi’s hands. But know this. If you need a friend at any point, rip this. I will sense it, and I will immediately come to you. And you will be protected from anything Itachi has in mind for you.” So saying, she handed Sakura a paper rose.

“You seem rather confident that he will allow me to keep such trinkets.”

Konan nodded, her face impassive. “He will.” And with no further elaboration, she left as abruptly as she came.

Sakura eyed the rose thoughtfully. It was beautifully folded. Prodding it with her chakra, she realised that a highly complex jutsu had been placed on it – one she did not have the energy to investigate or unravel at the moment. She had dispelled the genjutsu that Itachi had placed on his seals without hesitation, since he would already have been aware of her chakra levels. But as far as Sakura was aware, Konan believed her to be helpless. And she wanted to keep it that way.

I'll leave it, she decided. She might be able to get some information out of Itachi about the hidden purposes of Konan's rose, since there was no way that Konan had given it to her out of the goodness of her heart. Sakura smiled as she placed the rose on the windowsill, and looked at the depressing view of rain pouring on a darkened city. Any time there was a power struggle between powerful opponents, it was the weaker parties that held the advantage. And Sakura intended to make full use of hers.

On approaching his quarters, Itachi was on edge. The genjutsu traps he had meticulously layered outside his door were gone. They had not been broken after being activated – that would have left traces. They were just gone.

He stepped in to the room, and his hackles rose even further as he sensed a light scent of roses wafting through the room. *Konan*.

“Did anyone come while I was gone?” he growled.

Sakura nodded from her place at the desk. Not that he needed the confirmation. Konan had left a calling card – a paper rose on the windowsill. He glanced around, and found that all the seals around the room were exposed. No wonder the traps had dissipated – he had used the genjutsu on the seals to anchor the traps. He growled again, tugging at his ponytail in agitation. His fault, it was his fault. He had thought he had been careful in disguising the seals. He should not have tried to be efficient, should have used different anchors for his traps.

Did they know? Had Sakura given away that he had not actually done

anything to her? Were his deceptions exposed? Was a trap being set for him even now?

He could feel the walls closing in, and he could not breathe. His sanctuary, which he had expected to be safe, had been invaded, and he could not trust to his traps to keep him and his secrets safe, not with Sakura there poking around. Savagely, he pushed the panic down. He could not lose control in front of her. *He could not.*

He had to get out. He didn't know where to go, but he could not be there, with her. Her pack clattered to the floor, and he used a jutsu to transport himself out of the base.

Itachi stood in the rain, and felt every inch a fool. Honestly. He had escaped from his quarters in the base to get away from Sakura's eyes that spotted too much, and what did he do? Stand out in the rain, where Pain himself would sense him.

He made no effort to move, however. From what he knew, Pain would only sense his presence out in the pouring rain. He would not sense Itachi's current emotional state, a fact for which Itachi was more than grateful. *Ten years* he had survived in Akatsuki, keeping his composure with relative ease. Sakura had upended all his routines and feelings of normalcy within a *day*.

He gazed up at the grey skies from his perch on top of the tallest skyscraper in Ame, focusing on the feeling of cool water flowing down his face. He had always loved being out in the rain as a child. It had been a refreshing contrast to Konoha's stifling humidity. Now, it simply made him feel as if he was being purified, cleansed of his sins. Intellectually, he knew that he would carry his sins forever, and something as simple as rain could not lift the burden from his shoulders. That did not change the fact that it made them easier to bear.

It will be over soon, he reminded himself. He estimated that it would take around three to four months for his plan to come to fruition. About a month or so for him to win Sakura's trust and display his supposed control over her to the rest of the Akatsuki. Then, he would get Pain's permission to bring her out of the base. Then, another couple of months for Sasuke to get word of his activities and track him down.

Then, it would be all over. He could die in peace, knowing he had done what he could for his little brother. Sakura would be safe from

the cruel plans of the other Akatsuki members as well.

The thought gave him strength. He could do this. He had survived in the deepest pits of hell the world had to offer. Surely, one inquisitive kunoichi would not break his iron control and will.

Just a while more, Shisui, Mother, Father. I'll be with you all very soon.

Chapter End Notes

So... there's a whole bunch of chakra science stuff that I included in this chapter because I decided to just indulge myself. Let me know if it's too much, and if you guys would like me to cut down on it in future chapters!

And thank you once again to everyone who reviewed! I love all of you, and it feels damn good to know that people are actually enjoying this story. You guys are the ones giving me the motivation to keep going!

Experiment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Man, Itachi had been *pissed*.

If Sakura had thought his aura had been menacing before, it was nothing in comparison with the killing intent that had radiated from him when his eyes had fallen on Konan's paper rose. She shivered in spite of herself.

Even her joy over her pack being returned could not temper the residual fear she had felt at the sight of his whirring tomoe.

Baka! Inner Sakura cried to her. *He's not even here. Stop freaking out and focus!*

Her first order of business was to examine the items in her pack. Every single thing was there. She had not even realised how tense she had been until she had felt her body relax at the sight of her notebook. She examined the strings she had infused with her chakra and then used to bind the notebook. All intact. He had not even looked through the notebook. She frowned. This was at odds with her impression of Itachi – she would have expected him to have catalogued and vetted every single item in her bag before allowing them to be returned to her possession.

Setting aside her notebook, she examined her medical pack. Sure enough, every single item in there had been disturbed. He had even examined every single compartment in her box of herbs. Though nothing had been removed – not even the herbs that required very little processing to become deadly poisons. Herbs that any Konoha genin worth their salt would have recognised. She frowned, and finished examining her things.

While the threads binding her other things appeared to be intact – Uchiha Itachi was far too canny to leave traces of his snooping – the chakra she had infused the strings with had been snapped. Every item had been closely examined. Except her notebook.

She sighed, and decided to schedule her contemplation of the enigma that was Uchiha Itachi for another time. It was time for her second order of business.

One shower later, Sakura almost felt like herself again. It was really amazing what wearing your own clothes could do for your sense of self. Having access to her chakra felt wonderful too – she could use a jutsu to dry out the clothes she'd washed instead of leaving them dripping all over the bathroom.

Just a few more days, and I'll have enough to summon Katsuyu-sama!

She left Itachi's cleaned clothing on the table next to his bed, and eyed the makeshift bindings she had made out of his shirt. She decided to stuff them into her pack where they would never see the light of day again.

I'm not being a coward. I'm just picking my battles wisely, she thought, almost feeling giddy with happiness.

Her gaze fell upon the paper rose again.

Well, there's a mood dampener.

She hadn't thought too much about the stupid rose earlier, but now it was beginning to stress her out. She had no way of knowing *what* that rose would allow Konan to do. Could it help her sense Sakura's chakra levels? Would she have sensed the jutsu Sakura used to dry her clothes earlier? She paused for a moment to curse her own impulsiveness before continuing her freak out.

Could Konan listen to what was going on in the room? Did she want to ask Itachi in a way that helped him maintain the illusion he was showing the rest of the Akatsuki? Or should she expose him? Did she *want* to be on his side, or Konan's? Was there even a power struggle, or were they all just messing with her so she wouldn't have the brain power to think of escaping?

She groaned. She was not made for dealing with intrigue. She was a simple person who preferred to deal with problems by screaming at them and throwing a few punches.

The only choice that was clear to her was that she could not just do nothing. That would leave her paralysed with fear and unable to act. She knew she was probably being reckless again, but she couldn't just dither between her options. That would really be giving up, and regressing to cowardice. No. Doing nothing was not an option. She needed to take the gamble.

I guess I'm more like shishou than I thought. It's time to roll the dice.

When Itachi finally made his way back to his rooms, dripping wet, his first priority was to get himself into dry clothing that would not induce hypothermia.

He left the bathroom with his most intimidating face on to deal with his second priority, which was to frighten Sakura into hopefully never interfering with his rooms' protections again. Once again, though, his tasks were interrupted by the kunoichi. She sat on his bed, calmly twirling Konan's rose in her hands. On seeing him come out, she held it out to him.

"You can't just do whatever you want to me anymore," she announced. "Konan-san gave this to me. She assured me she will protect me from you."

He froze. He had assumed Konan had just left the rose behind to show him that she had been there. He had never thought... and yet, he should have. He knew how she used her paper angels – *to hear the wishes and prayers of Ame's populace*. It would not be too much of a stretch to assume she was also listening to what was happening in this room. He was slipping, not thinking of such obvious things. He was truly fortunate that Sakura seemed to have decided to help him perpetuate his ruse.

"Is that so?" he murmured, and then activated a genjutsu. A simple one – Sakura would see them standing in a forest, to immediately alert her that she was in a genjutsu. Before he could even say a word, however, a negatively coloured Sakura appeared.

"Get the fuck out of my mind!" she screamed, and threw a punch at him. He was so startled that he did not even manage to react. His technique dispelled, and he found himself staring at Sakura with wonder. She flushed, and ducked her head.

Itachi was sorely tempted to try again, with a genjutsu that made use of his Sharingan this time. He resisted, reminding himself that he had more important priorities than engaging in a mental spar with the kunoichi. Konan's spying device had to be dealt with first.

Smart girl that she was, though, she played along, guessing where he might have been going with the genjutsu. She broke into heaving sobs. "It's not real, it's not real, it's not real," she mumbled.

He would have found himself questioning his own reality, wondering if the scene they were enacting was actually happening, if it had not

been for the fact that he had heard her cries the previous night. He knew what her real sobbing sounded like, and it was nothing like this exaggeration. Still, it would suffice for the rest of the Akatsuki.

“It is real enough to you,” he said coolly. His voice then took on a mocking tone. “Well? Where is your rescuer? Is she coming to help you, or do we need to give her a few more minutes?” he asked.

“She will,” Sakura waived. “She promised me.”

He plucked the rose from her hands. “And yet, you are still here. Under my power. If she truly wished to help you, you would already be in a different place, kunoichi.” He leaned closer to her.

“Understand, kunoichi. You are at my mercy, and mine alone. Focus your energies on pleasing *me* instead of trying to make friends,” he hissed.

Hopefully, they had said enough to allay Konan’s suspicions. It was time to end this farce. He dropped the rose on the floor, and then used Amaterasu. It was probably overkill, but he wanted every trace of Konan’s chakra gone. He wished he had done it the moment he had laid eyes on it. Then, he would not have needed to confront his own negligence in disregarding Konan’s spying device.

Once the rose had been reduced to ashes, Sakura let out a sigh.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I know you probably have your own reasons for doing it, but I know you didn’t have to protect me. You could have played your games of intrigue with them while actually doing what they thought you were doing to me. And... I guess I owe you one.”

He turned away from her. He didn’t want to have to look at her as he felt his façade crumbling. His lips twisted into a grimace as he thought of his naïve illusion that he could preserve his cold, psychopathic act in front of the kunoichi. He had underestimated her again. She saw too much, and too clearly.

He reminded himself of his resolve, and his goal. *Sasuke*. Everything he did was for Sasuke. He could still redeem this situation. It wasn’t necessary that he portrayed a two-dimensional villain. He could still be a power-hungry megalomaniac who found the thought of hurting a defenceless young girl distasteful. It would still work.

“You can thank me,” he muttered, “by refraining from interfering with the protections on my rooms, kunoichi. I’d suggest you do so regardless of whatever feelings of gratitude you may possess. You are

fortunate that it was Konan, and not anybody else, who came to toy with you today.”

Silence fell. Neither of them spoke for the rest of the night.

Sakura was bored.

The first day had been a veritable roller coaster of emotions – fear, agony, and anxiety. She had stressed out over replicating her notes from memory – only for her work to be made completely immaterial by Itachi’s retrieving her journal. She’d been happy to have her work and her herbs and her own clothes back, of course, but that joy had quickly faded with needing to confront the issue of what to do with Konan’s rose.

She’d essentially sided with Itachi. She’d helped him perpetuate the mask he showed the rest of the Akatsuki. She still wasn’t entirely sure she’d made the right call, but it was the best choice she could have made in the moment. Itachi had at that point already displayed an interest in keeping her unharmed. All Konan had were promises she probably would not have fulfilled, especially considering that she had not approached Sakura again.

And that whole performance they’d put on... it left her feeling more confused than ever. Itachi had been the very picture of an uncaring and unemotional killer who enjoyed causing pain. The contrast between his act and the way he behaved at other times solidified it. He was not who he pretended to be.

Then, of course, she realised that she was spending *entirely* too much time obsessing over the possible motives of an S-class criminal. *Idiot*, she scolded herself. *You’re stuck in a hopeless situation and you’re desperate for anything that could let you dream of escape. So you’re building a story that he’s some knight in shining armour who’s going to rescue you so that you don’t have to die.*

After that realisation, she had studiously avoided thinking of Uchiha Itachi.

But that left her with entirely too little else to do. Itachi had forbidden her from meddling with the protections on his rooms again, and she had meekly acquiesced. It wasn’t as if she could argue with his very valid argument.

Thankfully, she’d already copied down that unfamiliar seal which

affected her ability to regain her chakra. Though it wasn't like she was able to make much progress on deciphering it – she had theories, sure, but she wouldn't have any real backing for those theories until she could look at some reference texts. She could always experiment, but there was no way in hell she was risking doing any damage to the room. She still shuddered at the memory of the killing intent that had leaked from him when he had first spotted Konan's paper rose.

She and Itachi had basically spent the past five days ignoring each other. She had spent her time meditating and rebuilding her chakra reserves to make them just a little less pathetic. When Itachi was asleep or out of the room, she'd allowed herself to cry.

She felt intensely lonely. She'd never thought of herself as a social butterfly, but being cut off from everyone she loved *hurt*. It was in the little things – a quip she thought of which she wished she could share with Ino, a meal that Chouji would have appreciated, an idea for a seal she wanted to run past Tsunade-shishou.

She also missed Karasu, the cat she'd named for his sleek, black fur. She'd rescued him from drowning shortly after her father's death, and having him to care for had saved her from drowning too, in her own grief. She sorely wished she had Karasu to cuddle with again. She'd gotten too used to falling asleep to his comforting presence and his warmth. But now, the only animal presence she had in her life was the demon crow she'd lovingly dubbed Akuma-chan.

Actually, scratch that. Akuma-chan was the only *presence* she had in her life. Itachi barely counted, drifting in and out of the room as he did like a ghost.

But in any case, Akuma-chan was hardly a candidate for cuddling.

"What should I do, Akuma-chan?" she murmured. "I feel like I'm going crazy. I kept myself going all these years by finding things to do, and now I don't have anything anymore. I just can't stop thinking about all that stuff I don't want to think about!" She choked back a sob. She was so sick of crying, even though she knew it was perfectly normal for someone in her position to feel as she did.

Akuma-chan looked at her with his beady red eye and cawed. It sounded almost naggy. The thought brought a brief smile to her face. "You're right, Akuma-chan," she nodded, trying to ignore the fact that she was now pretending to have a two-way conversation with the damn crow. "I need to remember that it's okay to feel my feelings. I

just can't drown in them. I just have to exercise my own ingenuity to find something to do..." her voice trailed off as she caught sight of the pack she'd thrown haphazardly under the desk.

Of course. She was a scientist. No circumstance could take that away from her. She was also an idiot who had spent far too long wallowing, but she was going to focus on the fact that she was a scientist.

Grinning, she sat herself at her desk and looked through her notebook, lovingly turning the pages that had suffered indignities such as being dog-eared and having coffee spilled on them. She breathed in the comforting scent of ink and paper, and felt herself soothed.

She stopped on a page that contained a list of research questions she had brainstormed a few months ago. She nodded thoughtfully. It wasn't as if she could continue most of her experiments right now anyway, not without access to her lab or without full use of her chakra. But the particular question that had caught her eye could work. She could not get data of the standard she would like, of course, but knowledge was still knowledge, and she could perform some rudimentary experiments. And in any case, it was something to *do*.

Sakura got to work.

When Itachi entered his room, he had just wanted a warm shower and a peaceful rest. It had been a long day.

Of course, fate and Haruno Sakura had other plans for how he was going to spend his evening. One would think he would have gotten used to how she had disrupted his life over the past five days, but he still found himself surprised each time.

He felt a weight drop into his stomach as he took in the sight. The bathroom door had been left ajar, giving him a clear sight from the door of Sakura perched on the bathtub. There were already a few cuts on her left arm, and her eyes were reddened. He watched through horrified eyes as she used one of the blades he'd left lying around to provoke an escape attempt, and made a gash that was far longer and deeper than the ones she'd previously made.

Not again not again not again, his heart screamed. He forced his legs to move. He'd failed Shisui all those years ago – he had been unable to stop his cousin from throwing himself into the Naka River.

He would be damned if he let Sakura die before his eyes too.

Sakura concentrated as she made the cut. She needed it to be deep enough that she would get a usable quantity of blood – her first three cuts had all been too shallow, and she'd barely gotten a few drops from them. It was all really unsanitary, if she was being really honest. She wished she had a syringe to draw the blood, but she had to make do.

To make matters worse, Itachi hadn't even had the decency to leave a knife that still had a sharp edge. Making the cuts *hurt*.

Her focus was probably the reason she had failed to sense Itachi's entrance.

The next thing she knew, she had been slammed into the bathroom wall, his body pinned against hers to prevent any movement. Only her left arm had any freedom, gripped gently as if that would prevent the blood from spilling.

She took in his expression. She had not thought it was possible for him to be even angrier than he was at Konan's visit, but now she knew she had been wrong. He was absolutely *furios*. What she thought had been her body trembling with fear had actually been his shaking with rage.

"What," he hissed, "do you think you're doing?"

She paused, and then realised how her actions would have looked without any context. She let out a shocked laugh, only to find a hand gripped around her throat.

"You think this is funny?" he demanded. Okay, now she was just annoyed.

"Honestly," she scoffed. "Give me some credit, will you? If I was really trying to kill myself, there would be far more efficient and less idiotic ways to go about it than *slitting my wrists* like some overly emotional teenage girl! If I wanted to choose bleeding out as my method of death, I'd at least have the sense to choose a gut wound or something."

His eyes narrowed, and he took in the scene. After his eyes landed on the mug she was using to collect her blood, his gaze became more uncertain. His grip on her loosened, and her legs fell to the floor. Shakily, she stood back upright.

“Then, pray tell, do enlighten me as to what exactly you were trying to do.”

She ignored his sarcastic jibe, and grabbed the mug. Thankfully, none of her blood had spilled to the floor yet. Carefully, she used her chakra to gently siphon the blood into the mug. Once she had enough, she healed the cut just enough for it to begin clotting. Ordinarily, she would have at least healed it until it scabbed over, but she did not have the luxury of chakra.

She then turned back to see him regarding her with a mixture of irritation and curiosity. Could she take advantage of the curiosity? She deliberated, then mentally shrugged. It wasn't as if he could get even angrier with her at this point, and in any case, the results would be clearer with chakra that was not hers. Worst thing he could do would be to say no.

“Get me some chakra paper and ink, please,” she requested. He arched an eyebrow at her, but moved to do as she had instructed. She poured a small quantity of blood into two sterile contact lens holders she had found in his bathroom cabinet. When she was done, he returned with the chakra papers and ink.

She held up her right hand, and reached out to him. “Pulse the most minute quantity of chakra possible for you at this spot, please,” she said, indicating the tip of her index finger. He did so without comment, an expressionless mask back on his face.

Wow. That really was minute. His chakra control was almost as good as hers. She grinned internally at the thought that there was something she was better than him at, ignoring Inner Sakura's sly jibe which pointed out that he would hardly display the full extent of his abilities to her. She took note of the level of repulsion his chakra pulse generated. That would be her baseline for comparison.

“Now, pulse it to the blood in the container on the left. Exact same quantity, please.” He did so. Through her sensing technique, Sakura verified that he had indeed pulsed the same amount of chakra. And then jumped and whooped with joy as she felt the level of repulsion, many times greater than what was generated when he had pulsed his chakra on her skin.

“It worked!” she laughed, grinning at him like a madwoman. At this point, she did not even care that he was her captor. He was her partner in research, even though he had absolutely no idea what was

going on. And oh, it felt *good* to have one of her theories confirmed with actual evidence, preliminary though it was. Now, to see if the theory could have some use in actual application...

She grabbed the chakra ink he had brought and painted a standard seal onto one of the chakra papers. She had thought long and hard about what sort of seal would work best for her purposes, before deciding on a simple one that would emit light. It was a low-level seal, highly dependent on the level of chakra channelled into it by the caster.

Sure enough, the seal glowed with a faint light, similar to the amount of light a firefly would produce. She then dipped her fingers into the blood he had not pulsed with his chakra, and repeated the same seal next to the one crafted with chakra ink. She laughed again with joy as it emitted brighter light. Finally, she repeated her actions with the blood treated with Itachi's chakra. This one blazed the brightest of all, akin to the light produced by a flame. Success! She could almost hug him. It was rare that a first experiment produced a result that confirmed theories, let alone one that had immediate applications.

She looked up into his expressionless mask, smiling. She maintained no illusions about the fact that he was her enemy, but he had indulged her experimentation. And he had *talked* to her. She had never thought she would be so cheered by the simple pleasure of interacting with another human being. And for both of those things, he deserved her gratitude.

"Thank you," she said warmly, and then covered all the containers. She was not done yet – she wanted to retest the results after a few hours, to see if only fresh blood could produce the enhancing effect. But first, she needed to record her observations.

"Are you just going to leave those here?" he asked, as she moved to leave.

"Huh?" she asked, like the intelligent and articulate woman she was.

"I prefer my space to be sanitary," he bit off. Oh great, he was annoyed again. At least his anger from earlier seemed to have faded. "I have allowed you to amuse yourself with these pursuits. The least you could do is to clean up after yourself."

She rolled her eyes at him. Maybe she needed to move mourning her survival instincts earlier on the agenda. "There's no need to be so rude about it," she grumbled. "A simple, 'Hey Sakura, please clean those

out, thanks!' would have worked.”

He fixed her with a glare. She rolled her eyes again and collected up her containers. As she closed the door behind her, she heard the sounds of the shower starting. Good, she would have time to record her results without him looking over her shoulder. She could not help the smile that bloomed on her face. She might be trapped here, but she was still of use to her home. There were still things she could do. Her grin widened even more as she considered her chakra levels. The next morning, she would summon Katsuyu-sama and send off her missive to her shishou. And she'd have some good news to include with said missive too.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so glad this chapter's finally out in the world! The scene where Itachi sees Sakura cutting and jumps to his own (admittedly valid) conclusions, and Sakura's retort that she wouldn't kill herself in such a dumb way, was the scene that actually inspired this whole story for me. I wanted to capture that dynamic, and well... here we are.

Again, thanks so much to all who reviewed! I know I'm not great at replying directly to the comments, but please know that I squeal internally (and eternally) whenever I see them.

Sealed in Blood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tsunade needed a stiff drink. It was difficult enough getting through the day without some sake to invigorate her and keep the memories of loss far. It was harder still once she had received the tracking team's report.

The news was bad. They had travelled to Sakura's last known location, and tracked her from there. They had ended up in a small settlement between Konoha and Iwa. Sakura had unmistakeably been there, and had faced off the Akatsuki – the townspeople had only been too eager to continue discussing the pink-haired kunoichi who had fought the nin in black cloaks and who had sheltered so many of their people during the attack. They were already calling her 'Sakurairo no Akuma' – the demon of cherry blossom pink.

Tsunade couldn't even dredge up a smidgen of pride for the reputation her apprentice was developing. How could she, when the girl she loved so much had been taken captive? The tracking team had reported that the trail was cold, and they could not pick up any traces at all of which direction Sakura had been taken.

Haven't you taken enough from me? she screamed mentally to the heavens. First her brother, then her love, and now, her heart's daughter.

Still, she resisted the call. In a fit of rage, she had poured all her sake down the sink. She had made an oath that she would never again drink if Sakura returned safely, and she intended to keep to that oath. Even though she knew the two were hardly connected, she had to do *something*. Sakura's situation was dire enough that she needed all the help from the gods that she could get.

Her resolve was tested again fifteen minutes later, when Danzō barged in with his lackeys Homura and Koharu. "We hear that the tracking team has returned without your apprentice," Danzō said, without even a greeting.

"You heard right," Tsunade growled. She hated dealing with the spider at the best of times, let alone now when she was emotionally

vulnerable and her head pounded from the *lack of sake* and she could feel the memories of Dan's final moments intruding on her.

"Well?" Danzō demanded, when it was clear that Tsunade had no intention of speaking further. "What are your plans?"

"Still unformed," she snapped. "I have just received the news. I have not yet had time to decide on a course of action."

"Of course," Danzō said smoothly, and deposited a scroll on her table.

Tsunade's eyes narrowed. "What the hell is this?"

"An executive order from the council, vetted and approved by the Daimyo," Homura said. "No missions are to be undertaken to retrieve your apprentice, Hokage-sama. We regret needing to take this action —"

"Oh, you regret it, do you?" Tsunade shouted, pounding her desk. The wood cracked, but the furious kunoichi barely noticed. "Sakura is one of the most valuable assets to the village! Her healing capabilities alone are reason enough to retrieve her, let alone her research which has already begun increasing our shinobi's survival rates! Not to mention all the information she has about classified information! How the hell is she not a priority for rescue?"

"Do you deny that she has been taken captive by the Akatsuki, a organization composed *exclusively* of S-class criminals?" Koharu questioned.

"No, but —"

"And do you deny that a minimum of 48 hours has already passed since her capture?" Homura demanded.

"You see, Hokage-sama," Danzō said, as if his use of her proper title compensated for the utter lack of respect in his tone. "You are too emotionally attached to the girl, and it clouds your judgement. Given the amount of time she has been under Akatsuki's power, it is likely that she has already spilled whatever information she possesses. All of it is as good as lost. And in order to mount an effective rescue mission against that group, we would need a squad of our best ninja. Even then, the odds of success are low. It is not worth risking the lives of our most talented elites just to retrieve a medic, not when we chance losing all of them. It is regrettable, but it must be done."

“Perhaps you can use your summons to try to contact her,” Homura suggested indifferently, as he was turning to leave.

“Are you a shinobi or not?” Tsunade shouted. “You know as well as I do that Katsuyu is hardly a tracking device! She cannot reach Sakura until Sakura herself establishes a chakra link to her through the Summoning Jutsu!”

“That’s too bad then,” Homura shrugged, and followed his fellow councillors out the door.

Tsunade screamed with rage. Her body trembled with the effort of resisting tearing that damned scroll into pieces. So those fossils thought they could block her from rescuing her apprentice. They had effectively bound her hands. Those selfish snakes just wanted to take advantage of the situation to weaken her and wrest more power for themselves.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. Homura was an old insect whose ideas got more useless with each passing year, but he *had* still sparked a thought within her. Biting her thumb, she quickly summoned Katsuyu.

“Katsuyu!” she gasped. “Sakura’s been taken captive by the Akatsuki. Has she established any contact with you at all?”

“No, Tsunade,” the slug said in her gentle voice. “No contact has been made so far.”

Tsunade’s shoulders drooped. Damn it. She should have realised – they would have some way of preventing her from using her chakra. But her apprentice was intelligent and tenacious. She would not give up so easily. If she spotted any chance, she would take it, and Tsunade wanted to make sure Sakura had everything she would need when she did take that chance.

With shaking hands, she pulled an empty pouch from her table and haphazardly tossed in writing materials, nutrient bars to replenish chakra, healing seals that had been prepared by Sakura’s own hands, and soldier pills. She also scrawled a quick note. “If she does manage to summon you,” Tsunade said, “please give this pouch to her. Please direct her to read the note as well. It is imperative that she has everything she needs to aid her in escaping. If she has the time, please ask her to give me a status report.”

“Hai, Tsunade,” Katsuyu responded. As Tsunade released the jutsu and

dismissed her, she sank shakily into her chair. She could not prevent the tears that fell from her eyes.

Sakura, please... Just come back to me.

After she completed her letter to Tsunade, Sakura rolled her shoulders and did her best to work out the stiffness in her back. Her muscles were constantly tense from stress, and the past five nights that she had spent sleeping at either Itachi's desk or on his floor had not helped any. Although she always found herself on the bed when she awoke, her muscles had already suffered through hours of abuse from the awkward positions she slept in.

The prospect of sleeping in that damn bed was becoming very tempting, especially since she knew firsthand how luxuriously comfortable it was. Still, she resisted it. Though she had tentatively decided to support Itachi's pretence for now, the thought of being any closer to him than she had to be still made her wary.

Baka, Inner Sakura scoffed. She seemed to be doing a lot of that recently. *You're not scared of ordering him around and telling you to fetch him things, but you're worried about being near him?*

Sakura flushed. She *had* been extremely impulsive. She had just roped him in to her experiment, treating him like some intern.

It's because I know that I'm going to die, she realised. What reason did she have to be afraid, when she knew how it would end for her?

Before she get further in her musings, the bathroom door opened and Itachi stepped out. It was still odd to her just how *human* he looked, stepping out of the shower in his simple clothing and rubbing his hair dry with his towel. He placed the towel on his shoulders, allowing his sleek, black hair to continue drying naturally. He then turned to face her, his face impassive.

Sakura gulped, and braced herself. Would their latest interaction be the one that finally pushed him over the edge and made him decide to just go ahead and torture her?

"What made you think of using blood as a substitute for chakra ink?" he asked. Sakura's jaw dropped. Curiosity about her research was not among the reactions she had expected. And there was no hint of any other emotion in his soft voice.

"I-it," she stammered. Great, now she was turning into a twelve-year-old Hinata. "It was the summoning jutsu," she said finally, still uncomfortable with the almost friendly nature of his question. He nodded and continued regarding her, as if to tell her to go on.

"When a summoning contract is signed, the chakra of the summoner is linked with the summons, right? I wondered why just weaving the signs and releasing chakra wasn't enough to complete the jutsu when you're summoning the contracted animal. At first, I thought blood was needed for the genetic identity of the summoner, but that didn't make sense. Chakra signatures are equally unique to individuals. And in any case, if the genetic material really is necessary, hair or saliva could work easily well. But it doesn't. Blood is needed to complete the jutsu. I also realised at some point that chakra pathways closely mirror the circulatory system. That's when I hypothesised that blood contains a greater concentration of chakra, and that it could help cast stronger seals than just standard chakra inks," she finished.

And then wanted to hit herself for being a big-mouthed idiot. She worried over the Akatsuki breaking her encryption and stealing her notes. And then, she just went and demonstrated her experiment to him. Not only that, but she mindlessly also told him her theory behind it just because he asked.

Kami, she really needed to step up her game if Konoha was going to have any secrets left at the end of her captivity.

He nodded thoughtfully. "I see," he said. "That was quite insightful of you." He continued to regard her, and she felt her cheeks flush.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

He then nodded to himself, as if he had come to a decision. He sat on the edge of the bed so that he was facing her. Sensing that a conversation was coming, Sakura turned the chair so that she was facing him as well. Nervously, she kept her gaze on her hands. Even without the added element of the Sharingan, looking at those piercing onyx eyes made her nerves go insane.

"I am going to give you a choice," he said, after a silence that was almost awkward in its length. "You are aware that the rest of the Akatsuki believes you to be tortured and violated. Your choice is to continue to cooperate with this ruse and enable me to fulfil it more effectively. Should you refuse, I will force your compliance using genjutsu."

“That’s not really much of a choice, is it,” she muttered. She picked at her nails in agitation, and then decided to take the risk and look up at his face. His Sharingan was active, and he was peering at her intensely.

“It may not be, but it is the choice you have,” he returned levelly.

“Why?” she asked. As his eyebrow went up in a questioning expression, she elaborated. “Why bother giving me the choice in the first place? If you’d gone ahead without my knowledge, it would have made it easier for you to trap me in whatever superpowered genjutsu you wanted to use. Instead, by telling me, you run not only the risk of me refusing, but also of me fighting harder against you.”

It couldn’t be because of her mental defenses – there was no way he knew how extensive they were. She’d checked them every single day. They were all intact – the only attempt he’d made to breach them had been five days ago, with that weak genjutsu that had taken Inner Sakura very little effort to dispel. She continued musing aloud.

“Your Sharingan is amazing for combat. Even Kakashi-sensei couldn’t break your genjutsu, even with all his experience with it. But I suppose it would be a lot more complicated to cast a long-term genjutsu, wouldn’t it? It would take a lot to convince me that I needed to play along with your plans for some reason. The genjutsu would need to be very elaborate. And it would be a strain not only on your concentration, but also your eyes, if you used the Sharingan to keep the genjutsu active.”

She paused, contemplating whether it was wise to voice her next logical thought. Screw it, she decided. If he hadn’t killed or hurt her for all the ways she’d already irritated him, she very much doubted he was going to start now. “Uchiha-san,” she said slowly. “How much has your eyesight deteriorated already?”

His nostrils flared, and his eyes widened. It was very quickly masked, but that and his silence spoke volumes.

“You need me,” Sakura said, feeling triumphant. As she’d guessed, her going along with his ruse did give her a bargaining chip. “Or rather, you need my cooperation. What will you give me in return?”

Itachi could not contain the awe that surged within him. Sakura’s intellect was razor-sharp. He found himself sorely wishing he’d had an ally like her in the days leading up to his clan’s massacre.

If wishes were horses, beggars would ride, he reminded himself.

Still, at least he had her support now. Or he would, if he played his cards right. He could not appear to be too willing to accede to her requests, even though he knew he already intended to. She would know as well as he did that any bargain struck too easily was suspect. It would imply that either of the parties had been taken advantage of, or that one was planning to betray the other. Neither would work for the sort of alliance he had in mind.

“You are unharmed, are you not? That is more than you will get from any other Akatsuki member. And you will certainly be placed under another member’s care if you are unwilling to cooperate.”

He observed the gleam of triumph in her eyes. Good. She had noticed his implied admission that her lack of cooperation would cause him trouble. It would push her to negotiate more aggressively, and he could plausibly concede further.

“You assume that my well-being is a priority to me,” she replied. “Let me assure you, it is not. So I will ask you again: *What will you give me in return?*”

He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised by her blatant disregard for her own welfare. This was a woman who had sliced open her own arm just to test the properties of chakra in her blood, after all.

“What do you want?” he returned tonelessly.

“You hunt one of my best friends,” she replied. “And you have tortured another mercilessly, who will eventually seek you out to kill you. I doubt you will hold back in retaliating.”

“You are concerned for your friends. You wish for me to promise not to hurt them.”

“No, Uchiha-san. If I do this, if I help you, I will be contributing to whatever your end goal is. While I’m quite certain that your agenda is separate from the Akatsuki’s, I have no doubts that it would suck just as much. I don’t want to help you in anything that could possibly hurt the people I care about – I would take my own life first. So you need to give me a guarantee that my precious people will be unharmed, and that you will do everything in your power to keep it that way.”

It took all of Itachi’s self-control to prevent a smile from forming on

his face. His little brother was fortunate indeed, to have someone care this deeply for him. He was glad. Protecting Sakura would be well worth the effort.

“Let me assure you,” he said finally, “that the culmination of my plans does not require Sasuke or the kyuubi jinchuriki to suffer any harm.” Her eyes widened, and he went on. “So, I have no trouble promising not to harm them. However, you ask too much when you demand my efforts to keep them safe. It could compromise me as well.”

She frowned. “In addition to my cooperation with your plans, I will do what I can to heal your eyes, and continue healing any damage your eyes may incur while I am with you. That will assist you in maintaining your safety as you take on the efforts to protect them. I am also willing to heal any and all injuries that you suffer during this time, if you can promise me that you will never use your healed eyes against Konoha.”

He felt satisfied. He had her cooperation. He didn’t really care about his eyes, of course – if they deteriorated, so much the better. Sasuke could defeat him more easily. But she had conceded enough so that she would not be suspicious of the bargain they struck.

He did want one more thing though – one thing just for him.

“I am agreeable to that suggestion,” he replied. “However, I wish to add one more thing. You will share your research with me.”

“My research?” she asked, clearly surprised.

“Yes. I believe your studies are interesting and will be of great benefit to many. I wish to know about them. I would also like to participate in any further experiments you wish to conduct. I will, of course, help you obtain any texts or equipment that I can reasonably procure.”

Sakura hesitated. It was one thing to offer her skills as a medic, especially since she had no doubt Akatsuki could find their own medics if they really needed them. But it was another to offer knowledge to him that was unique to her. She couldn’t deny that she was tempted though, especially by his offer of helping her. How could she turn this around without entirely negating Konoha’s advantages against the Akatsuki?

“If you want my knowledge, I want yours in return,” she replied evenly, hoping she betrayed none of the nervousness she felt. She felt

as if she was carrying the weight of her entire village, its fate riding on the bargain she managed to reach with him. “You will pass on your skills in genjutsu to me.”

He smirked. She felt a shiver of fear. Why did he look so pleased? Was there something she’d missed out?

“For the duration of your captivity, you will portray yourself in the manner that I instruct you to. In addition, you will offer your services as a medic to me as I require, and you will share your research with me and allow me to assist in your experimentation. In return, I vow to give my greatest effort in protecting the kyuubi jinchuriki and Sasuke from my organization, including allowing you to communicate freely with your village, if you manage to find a way that will not draw the others’ attention. I will also ensure that you suffer minimal harm for the duration of your captivity, and I also vow to never use my Sharingan against a Konoha nin. I will also train you in genjutsu. This bargain is acceptable to me. Do we have a deal?”

Sakura’s eyes widened. He would allow her to communicate with Konoha? That had not been one of her demands. Had he just assumed it was?

In any case, this was something for her to dissect later.

“We do,” she responded. She raised her hand as if for a handshake, then considered the importance of the accord they had reached. She wasn’t sure how deeply he regarded his promises, but on the off-chance that he did, she wanted to ensure he would hold himself to his oaths. “Can I have a kunai?”

His eyebrows shot up, but he passed one to her without complaint.

Sakura took a deep breath, and sliced open her palm. She then stretched her hand out to Itachi. Understanding dawned in his eyes. He took the kunai from her, and sliced open his palm as well. They shook on their bargain, blood mingling between their hands.

Later that night, Sakura did not wait for Itachi to fall asleep first as she had done for the past days. She also did not force herself to sleep at the desk or on the floor. Instead, she slipped into his bed while he was still awake, and deliberately turned so that her back was to him. It was probably a meaningless gesture given that she was already in his power anyway, but she wanted to acknowledge what their alliance meant to her.

Itachi too, turned, putting his back to her. When he heard her breathing even out, indicating she was fast asleep, he dispelled the jutsu he had placed on her that leashed her to his chakra. He also touched his finger to her blood that she had kept in the covered container, and added it to the chakra dampening seal, granting her the same exception that was already present for him. She would face no further restriction in her ability to regain and mould her chakra.

It was a promise sealed in blood, the deepest possible oath any shinobi could make to another. They would both honour it with everything they had.

Chapter End Notes

And we've reached the end of the first act! I'm so excited that we've reached this milestone in the story. Thanks to everyone that's supported this story so far :')

Playing with Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Sakura woke the next day, the first thing she did was to check that she was alone in the room. The second thing she did was to jump out of the bed and dance a jig, laughing merrily.

Her chakra was back to its normal levels!

She'd hardly been able to believe it when she felt Itachi dispel his jutsu on her the previous night – heck, she couldn't even believe he'd *had* a jutsu on her in the first place, and that she hadn't noticed. She'd assumed that feeling of wrongness wrapped around her neck was the product of the seal. It was a good thing she'd decided to fake sleep for a while to observe what he did, or she would never have known.

She hadn't been able to see what he did when he got out of the bed, since that would have required her to turn over and possibly expose that she wasn't actually asleep. But she'd felt the feeling of sluggishness leave her, and felt her chakra flowing normally within her again. She assumed he had disabled the seal that was inhibiting her recovery of chakra.

And now, she was back at peak condition.

Still grinning, she reviewed her letter to Tsunade.

Dearest shishou,

Even considering my current circumstances, I am well. Uchiha Itachi has taken me under his custody, but he has not harmed me in any way. There's only some kind of seal affecting my ability to recover chakra – that's why it's taken me so long to update you on my status.

Please send over any psychological reports we have on Uchiha Itachi through Katsuyu-sama. His behaviour has been unexpected. He seems to have applied some sort of genjutsu to make the rest of the Akatsuki think that I've been tortured, even though he hasn't done anything. He hasn't even tried to interrogate me. He gives me food at regular intervals, and he let me have all my things, shishou. Even the blackwort. I'm not sure what to make of it.

Please, please, I'm begging you, DO NOT let Naruto find out I've been taken. The very purpose of me being here is to be bait for Naruto. HE CANNOT KNOW. And don't send anyone else for a rescue either – it will be a suicide mission. The Akatsuki are crazy powerful.

I love you, and I miss everyone. I'm trying to figure out a way to get out. I haven't stopped fighting shishou, I promise.

Love, Sakura

Her smile faded as she considered the line that she was trying to escape. It hurt her to have to lie to her shishou, but what could she do? Knowing that Sakura was resigned to her own death might make her choose to do something reckless. Actually, she still might – like Naruto, Tsunade was not one to ever give up on her precious people.

Frowning, she added a postscript detailing the bargain she'd reached with Itachi. Knowing she was in a position to negotiate with the man might set her shishou at ease.

Should she disclose that she had agreed to share her research with Itachi? She hesitated, and decided against it. Tsunade might not think learning the secrets of his genjutsu techniques and the ability to study his Sharingan was worth the trade. She would tell Tsunade in person, she rationalised. She just didn't want her intentions to be mistaken, as it easily could be if she communicated it in writing. She didn't want Tsunade to think her judgement was compromised in any way. And in any case, it was a personal exchange. It was *her* research, and she could damn well decide who she was going to share it with.

She folded up the note, and bit her thumb to summon Katsuyu.

“Sakura!” the slug trilled as it appeared. “Thank goodness you are alright. Tsunade was so worried. Here, take this. There's a note inside for you too,” Katsuyu said, as a brown pouch materialised on the table.

Sakura felt tears well up in her eyes. She had not been forgotten after all. She'd told herself over and over that it was too risky to expect Konoha to send her any aid at all, and not to expect anything, but she was still glad that her shishou had found a way.

Sakura,

If you are reading this, I am so relieved that you are well enough to do so, and that you are able to summon Katsuyu. I've packed anything I thought

you might need in the pouch, including writing supplies so that you can send me a status report.

It breaks my heart to tell you that I can't send a rescue team yet. Those bloody snakes on the council went behind my back and got an order from the Daimyo forbidding it. I'll still find a way, of course. Just that it will take more time because I can't risk them finding out.

Stay strong, Sakura. We'll get you home. I will summon Katsuyu every 24 hours, so do not hesitate to send word through her if there's anything you need.

Stay safe.

Sakura decided to scribble yet another postscript at the bottom of her letter to assure Tsunade that she was not in any way upset by the lack of rescue, and repeated her request not to send a rescue team for her. She also added that Itachi had no opposition to her continuing to communicate with Konoha, and that she'd pass along any intelligence she could gather about the Akatsuki.

Finally sealing up the missive, she passed it to Katsuyu-sama and dismissed the summons. She let out a deep sigh of relief.

Now, to begin planning her next move. She needed to assess just how dedicated Itachi was to the oaths he'd made.

Itachi was not surprised when Konan cornered him in the kitchens as he was washing up after his own lunch and preparing a plate for Sakura. He only wondered what had taken her so long.

"You destroyed my jutsu," she said, the disapproval apparent in her tone.

"I asked you to be my partner to assist me, Konan-san. Not to spy on my personal activities."

"Your *personal activities* concern the entire organisation in this instance!" she hissed.

"If he wished a report, Konan-san, Leader-sama only needs to request for it. In any case, I have no obligation to report to *you*, regardless of your closeness to Leader-sama. I still maintain primary control over the girl. Your role is only to provide support as needed. Do not attempt to spy on me again."

Konan sniffed, but did not pursue the topic any further. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the plate he was preparing.

“You go to great lengths for this girl,” she mused. “You keep everyone away from her, and you feed her well. With food cooked by your own hands too.”

“It takes as much effort to cook for two as it does for one. You know this, Konan-san. In any case, I require her to retain physical strength for her tasks. Her mental strength is another matter, and I would appreciate if you did not put ideas in her head that there are other people she could rely on. You caused quite a setback in my progress in making her entirely dependent on me.”

His logic was sound, but he could still sense Konan’s suspicion. Doing what he had done, taking Sakura under his custody, was extremely out of character for him. He had almost never taken any initiative or interest in the Akatsuki’s activities before, doing only what was ordered of him. He needed to compromise a little.

“I will present her to you and Leader-sama next week, Konan-san. You may see for yourself the progress that has been made.”

Konan nodded. A dismissal. He felt her eyes on him as he walked back up to his rooms.

“Four days?” Sakura almost screeched. She knew that her bargain with Itachi would require her to interact with the rest of the Akatsuki at some point. But having a clear deadline only made it more real. Somehow, this room had come to represent a sanctuary of sorts for her. She decided to deal with the uneasy implications of that sentiment at a later time.

“Four days,” Itachi confirmed calmly. “Do not worry overmuch – you will not be required to spend much time with them. You will merely need to act meek and obedient. As much as that is possible for you.”

Wow. Itachi was actually really mean in an understated way. Who would have guessed?

“It’ll be possible enough,” she grumbled. She paused and took a deep breath before her next statement. She hated what she was about to say, but she needed to know how Itachi’s priorities were stacked. She trusted his promise not to hurt her unnecessarily, but what if it became necessary? She would rather test it ahead of time, when she

was prepared for whatever consequences would result.

“I will need you to do something to help me prepare, though,” she said. Kami, this was so awkward. She couldn’t believe what she was about to say.

He nodded impatiently, waiting for her to continue.

“You will need to do what the rest of the Akatsuki think you did.”

He stiffened. “Explain.”

Great. It was about to get even more awkward.

“I’ve been on a lot of seduction missions before,” she began. She normally hated beating around the bush, but she would do anything to make this situation less uncomfortable. Not to mention that she needed to get the story straight, given that it was a whole load of bullshit.

“Congratulations,” Itachi said after a long pause, as she deliberated how to continue. She glared at him. He really was mean.

“I usually have no issues interacting with the targets themselves,” she continued finally. “It’s not hard to act shy and innocent – that’s the kind of role I generally am required to portray. I don’t fail many missions, but the ones where my cover got blown, well, those were the ones where there were no relations between me and the target, and I was required to act as if there were.”

She noted absently that his face appeared even paler than usual. Huh. She hadn’t thought that was possible.

“So what I’m saying is, I need you to sleep with me. And you need to make sure to hurt me. It needs to be painful. If not, I don’t know how well I can maintain my end of the deal.”

He stepped closer to the bed, where she was seated. Sakura crossed her arms instinctively, wanting to create any kind of barrier between them.

“So you are saying,” he said coolly, “that you will be unable to fulfil the terms of our agreement.”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all!” Sakura snapped. “I’m telling you that I can act like I’m scared of you. I can act meek. But I can’t act like

a girl who has been assaulted. I've seen so many of those women in the hospital! Do you have any idea just how many gestures are involved to sell the story? I'd need to flinch when you speak or look at me a certain way. I'd need to walk a certain way, speak a certain way. And all of it needs to be automatic and instinctive. I could have pulled it off it was just men I needed to fool. But Konan's here, and a woman would know if it was fake in any way. Unless you can tell me for certain that she had an extremely sheltered upbringing and that she was constantly protected from attentions of the wrong sort. And that she's never had contact with anyone who would have received those attentions."

His face darkened as she continued her tirade.

"We may have an alliance, kunoichi," he replied coldly. "But that does not give you the right to make such demands of me."

"I'm not making any demands!" she cried. "I'm just trying to fulfil my end of the bargain. I'm just asking you to help me. If you'd rather not, then fine! Just say so. But don't blame me if we fail the mission."

There. She'd laid out, made it as clear as she could. The choice was between her safety and his goals. Based on how he reacted, she'd have a gauge of just how much she could count on him.

He leaned closer to her, peering intensely into her eyes. Onyx bled to crimson. Their foreheads almost touched. Sakura's heart sank. It was just as she'd expected. He chose his goals. She braced herself for the violation that was coming. She'd asked him to do it, sure, but that wouldn't make it any less painful.

Itachi, however, appeared to have different ideas. A cruel smirk crossed his face.

"What is your game, kunoichi?" he murmured. His hand reached out and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Sakura shivered. "All this sudden concern for whether you can perform or not, whether my goals can be achieved. Perhaps you are simply trying out your luck with me, since you failed so spectacularly to ensnare my foolish little brother?"

Sakura's body moved of its own accord. Before she could talk herself out of it, she raised her hand and slapped him with as much force as she could without using chakra.

He straightened from his crouch so that he was towering over her.

When she managed to bring herself to look up at him, his face was an expressionless mask once again. He hadn't even flinched, even as the red imprint on his cheek indicated just how hard she'd hit him.

"That was unwise," he said tonelessly. "However, I will not punish you for it. Since I do not make vows that I cannot keep, and I swore an oath to not cause harm to you. I highly suggest you do not try a second time."

She was furious. She could feel the blood racing within her. How she wished she could beat him to a pulp! Who the hell did he think he was, saying all these cruel, nasty things to her?

"You could have dodged. So don't give me any bullshit about your generosity," she said, with what she thought was great restraint.

"It would have been beneath me," he said simply, turning away from her.

That dismissal. It hurt more than all his mockery. Her chakra levels were full, and he would be aware of that, with his Sharingan. He would know that she was perfectly capable of inflicting damage. And yet, he still dismissed her to the extent that he was willing to *put his back to her*.

"So even with me being back at full chakra. You still think I'm beneath you? That I am no threat?" she asked, hating how her voice cracked. Damn it! She couldn't believe she really cared so much about a mass murderer's opinion of her abilities.

He turned back to face her. "Your oath was to heal any and all injuries," he said blandly. "I assume that applies to injuries inflicted by yourself as well. Am I correct, or are you so fickle that I cannot trust a blood-sworn oath from you?"

Sakura screamed, a broken cry of rage. He was so unbelievable. He just... he kept changing the angle of attack. She got herself ready to respond to one remark, and then he insulted another aspect of her personality. There was no use in continuing this conversation.

She glared at him, uncaring of the tears that were welling up in her eyes. "I hate you," she whispered, the venom clear in her voice.

Itachi again crouched before her. His thumb caressed her face gently, wiping the stray tear that was trailing down her cheek. "As you should," he murmured.

He looked up, and crimson eyes met green. And then suddenly, impossibly, his lips were on hers. He drew her into his arms, and she felt him stroke her hair.

This was all so wrong. He carelessly inflicted wounds on her with his words, and then he kissed and caressed her so tenderly, the way she had dreamed of a lover doing to her. They were allies, but that didn't change the fact that they were on opposite sides. It shouldn't feel so safe, so right, being held by him.

And yet, it did.

And she found herself melting into his embrace as he nibbled on her lower lip. She sighed against his lips, and her arms wrapped around his neck.

He froze.

And then he flickered out of the room, leaving Sakura feeling lost, confused, and utterly used.

Itachi felt like he was going to be sick.

He was again perched on his spot at the top of the tallest skyscraper in Ame, his head buried in his arms. There were no words for what he had done.

He'd hurt her. It had been his intention, yes, to anger and upset her in order to distract her from that terrible request she had made. But that pain in her eyes as she'd looked up at him... And the way she'd screamed...

He felt every inch the monster he was. One slap was not enough to compensate for all the things he had said and done. He should return, and let her pummel him within an inch of his life.

He should have left. The moment he'd known his words had hit the mark, he should have disappeared. But what did he do? He allowed his desire to comfort her to take over. His iron self-control had faded in the instant he'd needed it most, and all he could see were those eyes. So full of hurt and betrayal.

He loathed himself all the more that it was not just pity and compassion he'd felt. No, he dared to feel *attraction*. Somehow, in that moment, her face full of emotion, she had looked so beautiful. He'd

felt himself drawn in by the desire to kiss her, to touch her, to know her. To wipe her tears and replace her hurt with pleasure, to worship her as she deserved. To take back his words, and beg her forgiveness – no, she did not need to “try her luck”, as he had so crassly put it. He was already captivated.

And now, try as he might, he could not erase the memory of how she had felt in his arms. It had felt so right. She’d been so responsive to him. He felt a shiver pass through his body as he recalled how her entire body had softened, how she’d pressed herself closer to him.

He growled, and violently shook his head, as if that would jostle those thoughts loose. All of this had been difficult enough when he had just viewed her as his brother’s teammate. Now, he also needed to contend with his own deep knowing that she was a woman, and an attractive one at that.

He needed to fix this. Get them back to a working partnership. His impulses did not change the situation they were both trapped in.

But first, he would sit, and run from the problems he had created for just a while more.

When Itachi finally returned to his rooms that night, he found her gazing out the window.

“It’s an illusion,” he said.

She turned back to him, a look of surprise on her face. “Really? But it looks and feels so realistic,” she replied, her tone even. There wasn’t a hint of anger or malice anywhere. The only indication he had that their earlier interaction had even happened was the tension in her shoulders.

He felt another stab of pain. She was far kinder to him than he deserved. He would have expected her to be spitting fire at him.

“The base is underground,” he replied. “I’m not sure how they created the illusion – I can’t really sense it either, and it was already in place when I joined. But the weather you see from the windows doesn’t always match with the weather outside.”

She nodded thoughtfully. Silence fell. As it stretched uncomfortably, both of them spoke at the same time.

“I’m sorry –“

“I went too far –“

They both stopped. Sakura smiled.

“I’ll go first?” she offered. Itachi nodded mutely. What would she even have to apologize for?

“About just now...” she hesitated. He waited patiently, keeping his Sharingan deactivated through sheer force of will. “I’m sorry,” she repeated again. “All the things I said... I shouldn’t have said them. It was all nonsense.”

He stared at her in confusion. What was she even talking about?

She seemed to notice the look on his face, for she went on. “That thing I asked you to do,” she said, waving her hands as if to dispel her discomfort. “And what I said about me needing help. It was all lies. I’ve never failed a seduction mission. They suck and I hate them, but I don’t actually need you to do that.”

He felt as if he’d been thrown into a different world. Nothing made sense. “But why would you even ask such a thing?”

She flushed. Her eyes dropped to the floor, and her head sagged. She almost seemed to be retreating into herself. Then, he heard her take a deep breath and look back up at him, tears swimming in her eyes again. He interlaced his hands behind his back – he did not need a repeat of his previous indiscretions. He would keep his hands to himself this time.

“I was afraid,” she whispered. “I thought that if it came down to a choice between your goals and me, you would throw me to the wolves. I mean, why wouldn’t you? You’ve already done so much more for me than I’ve expected. But I needed to know for sure. So I did what any good scientist would do and tested the hypothesis,” she said, bitterness lacing her last few words.

Understanding finally began to dawn on him. Shame pooled in his stomach. She’d felt the need to go so far... Even his oath had not given her reassurance. He decided then, on impulse, to drop the act. He couldn’t sustain it. He just couldn’t. He never again wanted to see that expression on her face, or hear the pain her voice as she’d screamed. His plans be damned. He’d massacred his entire clan and tortured his beloved brother, but he could not bring himself to hurt

this one woman. He was weak, he knew.

He'd just have to find another way to maintain his cover to the rest of Konoha.

He allowed a rueful smile to cross his face. "Why is that something you need to apologize for?" he asked. "You are in hostile territory. You did what you needed to ensure your own safety."

She shook her head. "No. It's not okay. At least, not for me. I expect better from myself. You don't give ultimatums to or test your friends that way. You just give them your trust."

He didn't know what shocked him more – her steely resolve, or the fact that she had basically called him a friend. She caught his expression, and said with a grimace, "You probably don't feel the same way, and that's okay. But I need a friend in this place, and I'm so tired of questioning and doubting every little thing, looking for an ulterior motive behind it. I'm just not made to play these mind games. Maybe that makes me naïve and an idiot. But I can't live any other way. So. You are a friend to me."

"How can you be so casual about this?" Itachi demanded. "You know who I am. You know what I've done. I thought you were intelligent and cunning! How can you just give your trust so easily?"

She smiled, and it almost looked pitying. "If I wasn't sure of it before, I am now," she replied. "And in any case, I'm not trying to dismiss what you've done. But it's not my place to judge you for your crimes, anyway. That's between you and Sasuke-kun. I need you *now*, in the present, and it would be rather silly of me to throw away your help or push you away because of what you did in the past, wouldn't it?"

She paused, then went on. "You almost seem like two people sometimes. There's the man who made sure I was safe and comfortable, who allowed me to regain all my chakra, who gave me back all my things – even the blackwrt, and I know you know what that is – and who allowed me to order him around for my experiments. And then there's the man who murdered his clan, tortured Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke-kun, who said such cruel things to me. I don't know what the hell is happening with you, but I'm willing to look beyond the second man to befriend the first."

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "But know this, Itachi-san. If you betray my friendship and trust, that's on you. It won't be my fault for giving it in the first place. Understand?"

Reckless, foolish, weak, unable to manage emotions as a proper shinobi should, the part of his mind that sounded like Uchiha Fugaku and Shimura Danzō whispered. But another part of his mind protested, reminded him that true strength and courage lay in what she did – laying her vulnerabilities bare, acknowledging them, and continuing to live her life by her own principles in spite of the risks. It was beautiful. He activated his Sharingan so he could remember this moment forever – her eyes still wet with unshed tears, but her back straight and her gaze meeting his fearlessly, even as it was the feared Sharingan looking back into her emerald eyes.

A friend. He had not had a friend since Shisui's death so long ago. He'd thought he would never need anyone else, that he could bear the burden of his tasks and his sins on his own shoulders so that no one else would ever need to. He'd thought he could protect his village and his brother from the shadows, and die alone as a villain. The offer she extended now, though, was like a blazing beacon of warmth he didn't know he'd needed.

A friend. He could use a friend too. Someone who shared his goals, of protecting that which they both loved. Someone who would not examine his every word and action with suspicious eyes. Someone who might view him as just Itachi.

"Your trust and friendship are unwarranted and undeserved," he muttered. "But I will accept it in the spirit with which it is offered." He sighed. He needed to start earning her regard by at least matching her courage. By being honest, and by being his true self.

"And on that note, I must ask your forgiveness. You, at least, had reason for saying what you did. I..." he trailed off. He needed to gather his thoughts, and decide what he could say. Just because he'd decided to accept her friendship didn't mean he was going to spill all his secrets to her.

"It displeases me to think of causing hurt – especially of the sort you asked me to. And to someone who has done nothing wrong. Whom I have come to respect. But I did not dare to be honest with my reason for rejecting your request. I did not wish to risk revealing a weakness of any sort that could be used against me. So I chose the route of manipulation instead, to distract you with insults. I took it too far. I truly hurt you. I apologize. I will be honest about my thoughts from here on," he finished.

She smiled at him radiantly, and he felt the way he did after standing

in the rain. At ease. As if some of his burdens had been lightened.

And he could not even bring himself to care that this pink-haired woman was breaking through his shell, and that she was unravelling plans that had been in place for over a decade. At that moment, he would have done anything to make sure that she never lost that expression.

Chapter End Notes

So what happens in this chapter was actually drawn from my own experiences working with kids with trauma in an institution.

Thankfully, I've never had any of them ask me to sleep with them or anything equally inappropriate, but they do push boundaries a fair bit. It's their way of trying to gain control in a situation where they feel helpless - they want to know exactly how far they can trust you, and they want to know how to push your buttons.

While Sakura and Itachi did form an alliance in the past chapter, it's still an uneasy one in many ways. It doesn't erase the power differential, and it doesn't change the fact that she's spent years viewing him as a criminal. They still need to earn each other's trust. I sped up the process a fair bit for pacing reasons, but realistically, it would take much longer than this. I really hope I managed to do justice to that in this chapter!

What Lurks Within The Mind

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter includes a scene where a character takes on the mentality of someone who has been abused. It could be potentially triggering, so read at your own risk.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

That night, Sakura tried to fall asleep as she usually did, taking slow, even, breaths, and allowing the feeling of warmth and the weight of her body on the bed to lull her into a state of rest.

It didn't help.

None of her breathing exercises could shift her mind from the memory of Itachi's lips on hers. His soft, gentle, kiss. His arms wrapped around her.

And then, he'd left so abruptly, and her feelings of shame had taken over. Stung by the insults he'd flung, and disgraced by her ready acceptance of his caresses. He was right - she'd basically moved from one Uchiha brother to the next, desperate for anyone who would give her comfort and affection. She hadn't even been able to bring herself to think of Sasuke anymore – all she could feel was the phantom sensations of Itachi's fingers stroking her hair.

She'd cried for about an hour first. She speculated on why he'd kissed her, and why he'd left. And then, she'd forced her mind away from running that well-worn but ultimately unproductive path of thought. She considered his actions, setting aside the edges of his words and the weight of her emotions.

He'd passed her test.

He'd deflected her attention by hurting her feelings, yes, but even when she'd pointed out to him that the situation called for him to prioritise either her safety or his goals, he hadn't hurt her. Adding up all the ways in which they'd interacted over the past days, she had to acknowledge an undeniable truth: she was in no danger from Uchiha Itachi.

And then, she began drowning in a miasma of fear, a nightmare of her own making. She had been reckless. She hadn't been able to trust him,

and she had pushed him too far as a result. She recalled the stricken look that had passed his face the instant before he'd fled.

She had been so afraid that she'd pushed away the only person she had left, the last person she would connect with before her death. As little as she wanted to admit it to herself, she knew now that she would have done anything to keep him close. She'd rationalized to him that it wasn't her place to judge, but she knew she had to be honest with herself.

How many innocents had died by his hands? How many had he consigned to torment? She didn't know, and she couldn't bring herself to care. Not when he'd shown nothing but tenderness to her.

And so, desperate and impulsive, she'd thrown out an offer of friendship. Their alliance, built on a shaky foundation of mutual need, wasn't enough. She knew she'd keep her oaths, but she just couldn't trust that he would keep his. Even after she'd manipulated and tested him.

She had decided that she needed to bind him to her more solidly, her sole support in this place. Friendship was her solution – she could justify it as strategic, and it gave her some breathing room to deal with the complicated emotions that his kiss had awakened within her.

And then, much to her shock, he'd accepted it. And she'd found herself being happier than she had any right to.

How low had she sunk? She'd completely thrown aside her rules. She had allowed herself to be commanded by her feelings, instead of only consulting them as a guide in her thought process. And all because of Uchiha Itachi. Murderer. Criminal. Missing-nin. Enemy of her village.

Tea fanatic. Bookworm.

Excellent kisser.

She felt the dip in the mattress behind her, and forced herself to continue facing the door, and away from him. Even as she felt the heat of his gaze on her.

She'd compromised her morals and her loyalty to her village enough for one day.

Itachi told himself that he was going to sleep in the same position he

had the day before. He was going to lie down with his back to Sakura, facing out the window and watching the illusory raindrops as he allowed himself to drift off.

His body did not obey. He found himself facing her instead, and fighting the urge to pull her into his arms.

He desperately wanted to smell her clean, herbal, scent again. Feel her against him. Caress her body, and learn her contradictions of soft flesh and hard muscle.

And in that moment, Itachi realised something about himself: his self-control was nowhere near as perfect as he'd thought it to be. Yes, he was highly practiced at forcing himself to do things he absolutely did not want to.

But denying himself something he wanted was an entirely foreign feeling to him. He had never wanted anything so badly before, he realised. He had not realised just how lonely the past ten years had been, hiding his true nature, constantly avoiding speech to reduce the chances of betraying his true loyalties, guessing and second-guessing his every gesture and expression. And then came this guileless kunoichi with her brilliant smiles and her heart-wrenching sobs, and he had remembered what it was to have someone look him in the eye as an equal without quivering in fear. He had remembered what it was to feel safe with someone, to relax his guard and know that they would not attempt to stick a kunai in his back.

And suddenly, waiting and living his empty life until Sasuke killed him was not enough anymore. He wanted to test his abilities against her. He wanted to discuss all manner of topics, including chakra theory and philosophy, with her. He wanted to watch her smile and laugh as she worked on her experiments.

He was lying to himself. He just wanted her to smile at him.

What a far cry it was from the first night, when he had hoped for her to be out of his carefully-ordered life as soon as possible.

And so, his composure rattled by how quickly she had taken over his life and his headspace, in a moment of weakness, he'd grasped at the elixir that was her offer of friendship, and all the intimacies that implied.

And now, he couldn't even bring himself to regret how easily he had compromised his plans for his beloved little brother, all because

Sakura had shed a few tears. He was a reckless fool.

He forced himself to remember that regardless of his intention to keep her safe and her knowledge of it, the fact remained that he was in a position of power over her. He could not abuse that. It would not be right. And even setting that aside, even if he abandoned his plans for Sasuke, his illness, which worsened each time he used his Mangekyō, would kill him. He could not build bonds with her, knowing that it would not last.

He had vowed that when he finally left this world, he would not be grieved. Even if he was not capable of doing so in life, in death, at least, he would bring joy.

It was too late to retract his hasty acceptance of her friendship. The rejection coming so soon after the day they both had would cause her pain, and that was not something he was willing to do anymore. But he could ensure their intimacy did not deepen in any way, and they remained akin to acquaintances, or temporary teammates for a mission. He could do that. He just needed to remind himself what was at stake. Just needed to remain objective.

He forced himself to turn his body away from her. He might not be capable of resisting the attraction he felt, but he was capable of doing what his entire being cried out against.

“What do you know of Akatsuki?” Itachi asked without preamble the next morning. Sakura looked up from perusing her notes, startled. They had fallen into a silence that could not be broken after the conversation the day prior, both embarrassed by just how much they had revealed.

Correctly interpreting her expression, Itachi elaborated.

“If you are to be prepared to face them, you need to know what you’ll be walking into. We only have three days left before you are due to meet the leader and Konan. This will go easier if you can tell me what you know. I can then proceed to fill in the gaps.”

Sakura considered. “Akatsuki is an organization composed entirely of S-class criminals, though we assume there must be lower hierarchies of less skilled missing-nin, considering the profiles of Akatsuki’s completed missions. Their current main mission appears to be the gathering of the jinchuriki. That’s all, honestly. You guys are notoriously hard to keep tabs on, even though our intelligence

department is really good.”

Itachi nodded. “There are no lower hierarchies. There is only the ten of us.” As Sakura stared at him in shock, he went on. “Any additional manpower will need to be housed and paid. A waste, when ninja of our caliber can complete missions far more quickly and accumulate more funds as a result.”

She nodded. That would explain why they’d had so much difficulty collecting information on the shadowy organization – they were a small, elite group, where Konoha had assumed that only a more massive organization would have been capable of completing the slew of missions that Akatsuki was reported to have taken on.

And then, she felt a surge of excitement rise within her. She had an opportunity. Itachi either didn’t know or didn’t care that she was already in contact with Konoha, and he was just telling her about the organization. And sending letters through Katsuyu-sama was as secure as it got – her letters would be delivered directly to her shishou, or they would not be delivered at all. She could give Konoha *every bit of information* she could milk out of him. This could ensure Konoha was protected, that her precious people remained safe.

“And the jinchuriki?” she asked. “I assume that’s what the funds are needed for?”

Itachi’s face remained impassive. “What about the jinchuriki?”

Damn it. She was hoping that asking a vague question might have netted a wider range of answers. Answers to questions she would not have thought to ask. She tried deflecting back to him. “What are you willing to tell me?”

She almost thought she saw the ghost of a smile on his face. “Why don’t you ask me your questions, and I’ll decide what I’m willing to tell you?”

Itachi was having far too much fun. He knew that the whole purpose of this exercise was to give Konoha a means of gaining more information on the Akatsuki, and he was pleased that Sakura had once again proven her intelligence and picked up on the hint. He really should just tell her everything. And yet, it was too entertaining to watch her sputter with barely concealed irritation at his evasions.

He knew he was getting too attached. He’d changed his plans so many

times already. He was so full of justifications and rationalizations about how his plans would still work, how what he was doing was important to maintain his cover.

But the truth was that he just enjoyed being able to relax his guard and be Itachi. He enjoyed watching her react like an angry kitten. He considered pulling her into his arms and kissing her until she forgot her annoyance –

He caught himself, horrified.

He needed to stop before this kunoichi completely weakened his resolve. He reminded himself of his need for distance, for her to view him as the criminal he was. Already, he'd shown her too many of his cards, to the point where she'd felt comfortable enough to offer him, a known traitor, *friendship*.

Sasuke. This is all for Sasuke. He needs his closure, and he needs to return to Konoha as a hero. There is no room for dalliances.

He had always been good at prioritizing before. He could set the mission objectives above his own desires. He would reveal what would be helpful to Konoha without destroying his cover.

It broke his own heart to do so, but he gathered every ounce of himself he had allowed to leak out and stuffed it back inside. It was time to re-assume the mantel of the S-class missing-nin.

As she was formulating the best way to ask about Akatsuki's plans, she saw Itachi change. She hadn't realized how positively open he was being until she watched the indulgent amusement leave his eyes, and his expression become shuttered. If she'd thought he looked impassive before, it had nothing on the blank slate he was now. A rock would have been more expressive.

"What does the Akatsuki need the jinchuriki for?" she finally asked, reminding herself that the worst Itachi could do would be to refuse to answer.

"I am unaware. We were simply tasked to gather the bijuu." His voice was completely flat. It was as if they'd regressed completely to their initial state. As if their declarations of friendship had never happened. She mentally recapped their conversation. She was sure it wasn't something she'd said – it had all been rather neutral in nature, really.

She tried again, with a different angle. “Surely you must have *some* thoughts.”

He was silent. Different, he was so different. He was back to being that other man, the cold, unfeeling psychopath. Sakura wondered for a moment if he suffered from a personality disorder or demonic possession of some sort. It hurt. Why did it hurt so much?

“Our bargain does not include the sharing of intelligence,” he said. “If you can tell me why it is necessary for your task, I might reconsider.”

She sighed. It had been a long shot anyway, she supposed. An ex-ANBU would not give secrets away *that* easily. It was time to regroup, and to stuff her damned feelings aside. She’d been thinking with her heart instead of her head too much already.

He’s still an enemy, you idiot! You may have decided to trust him not to go back on his promises and to ensure your physical safety, and he may have kissed you, but that doesn’t mean he’s magically on your side, she snarled to herself.

Friends are supposed to be on your side though, a traitorous part of her mind whispered. *Especially friends that kiss you.* She ignored it. There would be time enough for self-examination later, after he’d left the rooms and she was free to have her daily crying session.

“I’m going to be meeting Akatsuki’s leader, and Konan,” she said finally. “I already know they think you raped me. But what else do they think of your purposes, and our relations?”

She would not have caught it if she had not been watching him so closely, but she thought she saw his shoulders relax by just a fraction.

“They think I took charge of you because I wanted you to heal my eyes,” he replied tonelessly. “I’ve outright told them that my intention was to break your spirit.”

“Makes sense,” Sakura replied thoughtfully. “Healing, especially something involving a doujutsu, requires a certain level of defenselessness and vulnerability from the patient. You would not want someone with questionable motives to have that sort of power over you.”

“Indeed, Haruno-san,” he said with an approving nod, and Sakura felt a thrill shoot through her.

Idiot, idiot, idiot! Your need for recognition should NOT extend to Uchiha Itachi!

It still felt nice to be acknowledged though. And even nicer that he'd finally stopped calling her "kunoichi" and started using her name instead. But that traitorous part of her mind wished that he'd followed her cue and used her first name instead.

She shook herself and returned her attention to what he was saying.

"Which is why it is vital that you conduct yourself in a way that is meek and submissive," he finished.

Sakura blinked. "That's it?"

He nodded. "It is a simple plan."

She frowned. "I don't think that will be enough to sell the ruse, though."

His eyes narrowed. "You believe my plan to be lacking?"

She glared right back at him. Trust him to turn it into a personal attack instead of a perfectly valid concern about the strategy. Why had she decided she cared about his opinions, again?

"How many seduction missions have you undertaken, Itachi-san?" she asked snippily. There. She could show him attitude too. She was getting frustrated with his mood swings. He swung so rapidly between being warm and cold, and being calm and angry. "Not that many, I'm sure. Kunoichi get those missions far more often anyway. Trust me when I say that it won't be enough for me to act a certain way. You have to sell it too."

"Oh?" he asked. It was amazing just how much displeasure he managed to convey in that one word. "And what would you suggest?"

"There's all sorts of things involved. My clothes need to change – probably to something more traditional and which looks more impractical for fighting. That will help to sell the idea that you've broken my sense of identity, and show your control. It'll be good if there's some indicator of possession on there, like maybe the Uchiha crest? Or if you have your own personal symbol or crest, that will be good too. Jewellery will be useful too, especially if it has some sort of connection with you. Again, it will help to emphasize that you view me as your possession. That will make things easier too if you need to

protect me from any... unwanted attentions, since I can't really do that myself. Oh, and you'll also need to be touching me possessively. Arm around my waist, hand on the back of my neck, that sort of thing. For my part, I'll do things like clinging to you, trying to get your attention, and so on," she finished.

"I agree with you on the subject of clothing and jewellery, and I have already made arrangements – I did not mention it earlier because I thought it had little bearing on your own preparations. As for your suggestions on physical contact... it is unnecessary. You will walk behind me with your head bowed, and speak when instructed to. That will suffice."

"But you've already created the impression of a sexual relationship! It will look really weird if we don't even have *some* contact!"

"I am not in the habit of touching others or allowing them to touch me. It would be suspicious if I began now."

"And I suppose you're in the habit of bringing prisoners to your room to rape them?" she retorted. "Or kissing them after making them cry?" She winced. She had not meant to say that last part.

His eyes flashed. "You overstep, kunoichi," he said coldly. "This is not your decision to make. You agreed to act according to my instructions, or have you forgotten?"

One would think that the whole 'pretending to have been broken by torture' thing was *her* idea, she thought sourly. He was so irritatingly stubborn. Couldn't he recognize that he was half-assing his own plan?

"For fuck's sake, Itachi!" she exploded. "Can you *stop* questioning my commitment to my promises? And use my name! You've already proven you know it."

Itachi blinked. It was even odds whether his surprise was from her language or from her dropping the honorific, but Sakura could not bring herself to care. Respect had to be earned, and she was done showing it to someone so pointlessly mule-headed, or who constantly made everything personal. So much for his words the day before, when he'd said he *respected* her. She took advantage of his silence, and pressed on.

"If we're not convincing enough," she hissed, "it's *my* safety at risk. You promised to do everything you could to make sure I wasn't harmed. And I know that you're not being so bloody stubborn about

this just because it's *unnecessary*. You also promised to be honest with me, Itachi. Or have *you* forgotten?"

He tugged at his ponytail. She remembered him doing that a few days ago. She supposed it was a sign of how agitated she'd managed to make him that she got a visible reaction out of him.

He turned so that he was facing out the window, away from her. She wasn't sure what he was looking for in the illusion of a raging thunderstorm.

The silence stretched, and passed the level of discomfort to become downright painful. But Sakura sure as hell wasn't breaking first. He was doing it again, she realised. When he became uncomfortable with a topic, he riled the other person up to make them forget the track the discussion had taken. Sakura was a fast learner, though, and she was determined not to fall into the same trap again.

After an eternity, he turned to face her again. "We will discuss this again later when we both have had a chance to collect ourselves," he said, sounding as if the words were being dragged from him by Shikamaru's shadow possession jutsu.

And with that, he strode out of the room.

Sakura supposed she should count it as an improvement that he hadn't used the body flicker technique to flee her presence this time.

It was the day that she was to meet the rest of the Akatsuki. Sakura twisted and turned, checking over her appearance again. She smoothed down the navy blue yukata. Itachi had chosen well, she had to admit. After he'd returned from yet another hissy fit, bearing a peace offering of dango, they'd had a positively civil discussion. He'd explained that wearing the Uchiha crest on her clothing would not work since he did not wear it himself, and that he would instead obtain clothing in the Uchiha clan's colours as a compromise. Though Sakura was unsure that any of the other Akatsuki would even recognise them as such, she had remained silent. The nature of the outfit was not the hill she wanted to die on in any case.

He'd remained silent on the issue of physical contact, and only grudgingly engaged when Sakura had brought it up. Eventually, they managed to find a compromise – Sakura would display all physical contact. Sakura counted it as a victory that she hadn't had to resort to violence to get to that point.

She smoothed down the yukata again, and checked her hair, which she had twisted into a simple bun. This had to go well. If Pain trusted that she was fully under Itachi's control, she could have more freedom of movement. Both she and Itachi had refrained from discussing exactly *what* she would be doing with said freedom – while he had agreed to let her communicate with Konoha when they made their deal, neither of them had brought it up again.

She frowned again, as she considered that part of their agreement. He really didn't appear to care about furthering Akatsuki's goals at all. Some of his actions, including coaching her on how to behave with some of the Akatsuki members, bordered on treason to the group.

She mentally filed that under the list of mysteries surrounding Itachi, and returned to examining her yukata to ensure that it was tied properly. Itachi entered as she tugged at the crimson obi, checking for the millionth time if it was neat and secure. He said nothing, but merely regarded her with a calm gaze. Strangely, she could almost feel his calm permeate her and release tension she hadn't even realized she was holding. She breathed easier.

"You'll cover for me if I mess up, right?" she asked, hating the anxiety still within her voice. Had she mentioned she really *hated* seduction missions? It was the level of deceit involved, and what she needed to do to herself to be able to pull them off.

Itachi regarded her with steady eyes. "You won't," he replied. He then unfastened the simple metal chain he wore. Pushing her hair to the side, he placed it around her neck and clasped it so that the metal, warmed by his skin, hugged her throat. It felt constricting, but Sakura let it be since it didn't actually inhibit her breathing in any way. Feeling his fingers at the back of her throat, though... she repressed a shiver, and told Inner Sakura to shove it. She needed all her focus for what was coming, and thinking about Uchiha Itachi's gentle hands would not help one bit.

"I've anchored a genjutsu to the necklace," he said. "It will make you look a bit more haggard, but that's not the important part. Konan is a sensory type, and I suspect Pain is as well. They will sense the chakra, and assume that your behaviour is influenced by genjutsu."

"Speaking of, you still owe me a genjutsu lesson," she said dryly, hoping to dispel her anxiety with humour. His lips twitched.

"And you owe me a lesson on seals, but there will be time for that

soon enough,” he responded easily. She nodded and let out a breath.

She thought back to her Kunoichi lessons. Yamanaka Airi-sensei had told her that just trying to fake the emotions wouldn't work for her. She was too genuine. She needed to engage in a mental trick, pushing her true self to the side, and basically creating a new persona that would play the role needed.

She'd worried that it meant she had a mental disorder of some sort, but Airi-sensei had assured her that she could not find any traces of the created personalities once Sakura had dispelled them. This mental technique resulted from a combination of her excess yin chakra and her rudimentary abilities with genjutsu, which was what had created Inner Sakura in the first place. She was just channelling it more deliberately for this process.

She closed her eyes, and began crafting the story of this persona.

She'd been captured. Her freedom had been taken away. She was entirely dependent on this man, who looked so much like Sasuke-kun. She had to please him. She had to make him happy. That was the only way she could be safe. He would be affectionate and gentle if she behaved, and would be violent if she didn't. But that was okay, because she knew how to make him happy. She loved him so much, her handsome lover with the mesmerizing eyes that desired only her. She lived for those moments when he looked at her with approval, and told her that she pleased him.

Now, they were going to meet his comrades. She had to make him proud. She had to be a woman worthy of a shinobi like him. She had to prove her devotion to him.

Sakura looked up at Itachi-sama. Her heart melted at the concern in his gaze. He *did* care for her. She knew it. He just wasn't secure in her affection for him. It was natural when one considered the way they'd met. He had chosen her for himself, rescued her from a pit of vipers. But she hadn't chosen him. She'd been so frightened of him at first, especially when he had been so rough when he'd first claimed her. But later, she'd realized that it just symbolized the depth of his passion for her.

He got angry when she said or did things which implied that he didn't matter to her. Or when she disobeyed him, or didn't display gratitude for saving her as he had done. Like when she'd tried to deny him, emboldened by Konan-san's false promises. But now, she had a chance to make things right. To show him that he was the centre of her

universe. But she had to be subtle, she knew. He would not appreciate if his comrades knew how important she was to him. He would not indulge her in front of them.

She allowed a smile to grace her features, and regarded him with shining eyes. "Anata, I'm ready," she said. "Let's go meet your comrades."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a tough one to write. I really wanted to show that they've made some progress in their relationship, while at the same time acknowledging the realities of the situation - it's just not that easy to change your perception of someone and set aside long-held beliefs. I hope I succeeded!

Also... I gave up. I never intended for this story to be a slow burn, but Itachi and Sakura are both stubborn as hell, and they're not going to just jump into bed with each other on a whim. There's a lot of barriers for them to overcome, and I've decided that I need to do that justice. So, they're going to take their own sweet time!

A Stab of Distrust

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On reading Sakura's latest note, Tsunade regretted throwing out all her sake. Not because she needed a drink, but because it would have given her something satisfying to throw at the walls. Scrolls just couldn't cut it.

Now, she paced her office, scratching at her arms in agitation. Ten days without alcohol, and her normally short temper was even worse. She constantly felt on edge, and she drowned herself in work to keep her memories at bay, small good though it did.

But she had to stay strong. Had to keep her resolve. At any moment, they could receive news about Sakura, and she could need medical attention. And there was *no way in hell* Tsunade would allow herself to be impaired at that moment in any way. Even though it was killing her, she kept away from the alcohol. She forced herself to eat at regular intervals, and did her best to sleep at normal hours, even though the nightmares kept her awake. She had to be at peak level if Sakura needed her.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she heard the clacking of Jiraiya's sandals, and her former teammate burst into her office, panting heavily. Good. He'd hurried. She had not told Shizune what she needed him for – she'd just told her to find him and get his ass to her, *now*.

"You called –"

"When the hell were you going to tell me that Uchiha Itachi was Konoha's spy in Akatsuki, you old toad?" she screamed.

Jiraiya blinked. He then sighed, and sat down. "I suspected," he said heavily. "Ever since the time he and his partner tried to grab Naruto. The genjutsu he cast on the woman who was supposed to distract me was sloppy, and it seemed like he gave up too quickly when we battled. But I never knew for sure. It just seemed impossible – I mean, this is *Uchiha Itachi* we're talking about. I was so sure I was over-reading the situation, and that it was one of Akatsuki's grunts who was my informant. We have confirmation, then?"

“Not exactly,” Tsunade admitted, her anger fizzling out at Jiraiya’s admission that he had not kept such vital information from her. “But Sakura’s latest report says that there’s no lower hierarchies in Akatsuki at all. It’s only those s-class missing-nin. Ten of them, apparently. That, combined with Uchiha’s treatment of her, and the fact that she can communicate so regularly at all... it makes it quite clear, don’t you think?”

He nodded. “I suppose it’s time to relook at the files from the massacre, then? There must be more to it than what we know. I doubt he would have killed his entire clan just to establish a cover to infiltrate Akatsuki.”

“Already done,” Tsunade grouched. “Sakura wanted his psychological reports. I pulled everything we had on him, and it just didn’t add up. I wanted to hold off on sending it to her until I was sure that what we had really *was* everything, but now, with this latest note from Sakura... I think it’s quite clear that there’s some very important information that’s been kept from me about the massacre.”

Their eyes met, and she saw the tiredness she felt reflected in his eyes. It had been a long five years. Five years of trying to keep Naruto in line, keeping the hyperactive and unpredictable ninja grounded in Mount Myōboku. Five years of futile missions trying to gain intelligence on Akatsuki, and handling the uneasy alliances they formed with the other villages to protect their jinchuriki. Five years of maneuvering and politicking, with the council attempting to block Tsunade’s every action.

And now, she needed to find a way to extract this information from them. There was no way the council didn’t know about the massacre. The entire mess clearly had their fingers all over it.

Itachi couldn’t decide if he was fascinated or horrified. Or a combination of both. He’d practically seen the transformation happen before his eyes. One moment, she was the strong, independent woman he’d grown to admire. And then, she’d closed her eyes, and her entire stance had changed.

Gone was the open, assertive posture. She looked reserved and demure now. Her back was still straight, but her head hung lower, the back of her neck exposed, and her hands were clasped in front of her. She was the very image of subservience. And then, she’d looked up at him, and he couldn’t recognize any sign of Sakura in that sickeningly

adoring expression she had given him.

And then... she'd addressed him as *anata*. Darling. A term used by women to refer to their lovers or their husbands.

He schooled his expression to impassivity. He could not afford any second-guessing now. He had to trust in her ability to maintain his secrets, as she trusted in his ability to keep her safe.

He turned and open the door, and she was following him, still in that damned subservient pose. He hated it, but knew that this was an act they both needed to put up. After all, she probably hated how cold and distant he was about to be as well.

Just before they entered the living area, he extended his chakra to sense the presences in greater detail... and swore internally. Every member of the Akatsuki was present. Including Madara, or Tobi, or whoever he truly was.

How had this happened? He'd chosen this day to present Sakura to Pain and Konan after studying the mission rosters. Conveniently, both Tobi and Kisame had been scheduled to be away for a bounty hunting mission in Kumo, Tobi having been temporarily assigned to take Itachi's place with Kisame. Even though Pain had been insistent at first that Itachi continue with his assigned missions, Kisame had proved an unlikely ally, stating he had no desire to be stuck with a "cranky and sexually deprived Uchiha". Itachi had not been amused, but had let the comment slide since it suited his purposes.

But now, they were both there. Kisame would undoubtedly become aware of Sakura's completely full chakra levels. That could be justified by the chakra needed to heal his eyes. Tobi, however... The rogue Uchiha would know more about Itachi's true loyalties than anyone else. Itachi had cultivated an air that he was indifferent to what happened to Konoha after the way he'd left it, but whether Tobi believed it was an entirely different matter. He had never quite been able to confirm the extent of Tobi's knowledge about the reasons behind his decision to massacre the clan.

Would Sakura be taken from him? Would she be tortured for the details of their interactions? He felt the urge to grab her and run. Or to lay his lips over her neck and mark her skin so there would be no doubt as to his claim over her. He resisted both impulses. He was skilled, but even he could not fight off the entire Akatsuki. And if he was too possessive over Sakura, Tobi might take it as a challenge.

“Anata?” Sakura murmured, placing a delicate hand on his arm. Concern shone out of her jade eyes, and Itachi found himself wanting to shake her, to demand she go back to spitting fire and brimstone. He almost wished she’d snap at him about getting a move on. The fierce kunoichi was the one he wanted at his back, not this quiet and meek woman.

This is still Sakura. She’s playing a role, and she’s playing it well – she might even successfully fool Tobi.

Aware that the rest could certainly hear whatever transpired between him and Sakura, he shook off her hand and fixed her with a cold stare. He shuddered at the look of fear that passed over her face, instead of the glare he’d grown to expect. “You will comport yourself in a manner that will not shame me,” he said coolly.

She nodded fervently. “I only wish to please you,” she whispered.

He turned to enter the room, Sakura trotting obediently behind him. The living area showed no signs of the confrontation that had taken place there just ten days prior. Itachi was almost amazed that it had been such a short time since Sakura had entered his life – it had felt like a lifetime ago. She’d managed to upend his sense of normalcy and regularity in every single way.

“Leader-sama. Konan-san,” he greeted, politely inclining his head to Pain and Konan. He did not bother to acknowledge the rest – he never did, unless he needed to address them directly. Sakura remained silent, and simply nodded to Pain and Konan as well. He sat down on the only vacant sofa, and Sakura settled herself on his lap, perching on his thigh. She kept her gaze on her hands, folded on her lap.

Itachi studiously avoided looking at Tobi, and resisted the urge to wrap his arms around her waist. He instead placed his hands at his side in a manner that he hoped looked casual. He would not push her aside, but neither was it his part to initiate any contact with her. Kisame hooted. “Well, Itachi-san! Never thought I would see the day when a woman broke through your walls enough for you to let her get so cozy with you!”

Itachi permitted a smirk to cross his lips. He did engage in banter with Kisame on occasion. “She does have her uses,” he acknowledged.

“You’re a dick, yeah,” Deidara informed him. “She was so explosive before. A living piece of art. Now... she’s nothing.”

Sasori nodded, an almost surprised look on his face. “I find myself agreeing with Deidara. You’ve taken what could have become a classic, enduring work of art and twisted and perverted it for your own selfish uses.”

Itachi remained silent. He knew exactly how he could respond to the two, shut them down, but he had spent far too long giving off the air that he could not care less for the petty squabbles of others. He turned to Pain and was about to speak, when he was cut off by yet another grumble.

“Pinky, you can do better than emo-boy Itachi,” Hidan informed. “My dick’s definitely bigger than his, and I’m a much better fuck!”

Itachi’s blood boiled, but he continued to remain silent. Hidan was not as stupid as he sounded – he was saying it just to get a rise out of Itachi. The man enjoyed violence, and had wanted to test his abilities against a Sharingan for years.

Sakura looked to him, and he looked back into her eyes impassively, unsure of what she wanted. She nodded as if she’d gotten an answer from him, smiled, and ran her hands down his chest. She then turned to Hidan, and said coolly, “If you value your life, you will not speak in such a way to me again. Shujin will kill you. I belong only to him.”

Disregarding the stunned silence that descended on the room, she turned back to Itachi and nuzzled his throat. Hidan burst into incredulous laughter, unbothered by the empty threat – after all, the man was functionally immortal. “What a feisty one! She would make a great sacrifice to Jashin-sama.”

“Hmmm. Explains the value of the bounty,” Kakuzu muttered.

Itachi was annoyed. *They had not discussed this.* What on earth was she playing at? *Shujin?* The previous endearment she’d used on him had been bad enough, but now, she declared him the master of her person to the entire Akatsuki. It was an archaic term for women to refer to their husbands – one that had fallen out of use even in the traditional Uchiha clan.

“Itachi-senpai!” Tobi exclaimed. “You and Sakura-san are married? Are you in love? Will there be children?”

This was the exact situation Itachi had wanted to avoid. Tobi’s interest in his relationship to Sakura was piqued. He had to salvage the situation somehow. Ignoring Tobi for the moment, he leaned down to

whisper in Sakura's ear, knowing his words could still be heard by shinobi ears. "Good girl," he murmured. "You have learned your lessons well."

He then looked to Pain. "As part of her conditioning, I applied multiple genjutsus. The confusion broke her mind, and distorted her perception of reality. She now thinks I am her husband. I saw no reason to discourage it, since it suits the organization's purposes as well," he said in explanation. "I trust this suffices to show the progress I have made."

"She outright disrespects one of our members, emboldened by her *relationship* with you. You call that progress?" Konan hissed. Pain nodded in agreement.

Itachi schooled his expression to boredom. "I worked with what I was given, Konan-san. If you are not satisfied with what has been displayed so far, you may test her. I know the organization's needs will be met."

He turned to Sakura, and grasped some of her hair to lift her head from his throat. He needed his focus, and the butterfly kisses she was placing on his throat were doing... things... to him. "Enough of that, now," he said curtly.

She nodded, and whispered, her voice trembling, "I'm sorry, anata." He ignored her, keeping his gaze focused on Pain and Konan. It would not do for him to attend too much to her.

If there was one thing Konan had faith in, it was her ability to read situations and people. Growing up as a war orphan tended to do that to a person, since it was vital to be able to quickly discern friend from foe. It was a skill she needed more than ever after Yahiko's death, as she dedicated herself to protecting the sole precious person she had left from the man who named himself Uchiha Madara.

Nagato believed in Madara's promises, and stubbornly insisted on following his plans. Konan was more suspicious, and dedicated herself to studying the limits of Madara's abilities. Madara did not strike her as the sort of person to share, and she had no doubt that he lusted for Nagato's Rinnegan. She knew that it was not a matter of *whether* the betrayal would come, but *when*.

And so, when Madara brought Uchiha Itachi to join Akatsuki, she remained on alert, certain that Itachi was Madara's man through and

through. Setting aside the fact that they were both from the same clan, there was absolutely no reason for Madara to personally recruit a doujutsu user who might pose any trouble to him. She had known he was dangerous – potentially even more so than Madara, since he did not set off her sense of wrongness the way Madara did.

And so, when Itachi had claimed the girl, she had worried. Using the bijuu, supposedly to bring peace to the world, had been Madara's plan. It had also been Madara's plan to capture the girl and use her as bait, even though they all knew that the kyuubi had to be sealed last, and that it would have made more sense to take the Ichibi's loved ones hostage first.

And then, Itachi, whom she knew was Madara's puppet, took over the girl and did not allow anyone else to have contact with her. He had risked openly defying Nagato and destroyed her rose so that she could not keep tabs on his interactions with the girl. The girl who had excellent healing abilities. Who could successfully perform a transplant of the Rinnegan.

The whole thing stank of a conspiracy of epic proportions. Konan had no doubt that it was all a ruse, and that Nagato would find himself attacked sooner rather than later. She cursed her decision to observe Itachi more closely before responding to his destruction of her rose. Her hesitation had cost her, and the girl was now fully under the heartless bastard's control.

She had to break the bond that was forming between them. She had been too cautious in her tentative overtures to the girl. The situation as it stood called for bolder actions.

She smiled coldly as a plan took shape within her mind. Yes, that would work. She would drive a wedge between them, and delay Madara's betrayal of Nagato. It would give her the time she sorely needed to find a more permanent way of protecting him.

Itachi felt dread seep through him as a smile formed on Konan's face. She was pleased with herself. That would not mean anything good.

"Itachi, stab the girl. Make sure the wound has the capacity to be fatal, but will not kill her instantly. She is not to begin healing herself until Leader-sama orders her to do so."

The feeling of dread intensified. He knew they would not allow her to be permanently harmed, for they still needed her. Reminding himself

of that fact did not help. It had been bad enough when he had suspected he would need to sit by and watch her be injured. But now, to think that he would be the one wielding the kunai...

This was not about testing Sakura's capacity for following instructions, or her ability to be used as a tool for Akatsuki's purposes. No, this was about testing him. *They must suspect that I am forming an attachment to her*, he realized.

Itachi looked down at Sakura's face, still turned toward him with that expression that masterfully blended adoration and fear. "You understand your instructions?" he asked. She nodded, and stroked his cheek. "Yes, anata. I understand. I will not shame you," she vowed.

He felt his heart wrench, but left his expression empty. They both had their roles to play, and he needed to appear as detached and uncaring as possible, to mitigate the damage that had already been done. "Try not to allow any lasting damage to come to her," he said, injecting as much boredom and indifference into his tone as he could. "I would hate for my efforts to go to waste."

"Yes, I'm sure those efforts were highly unpleasant," he heard Konan mutter sarcastically. Tobi giggled. "Yes, Konan-senpai! Itachi-senpai had to have *lots and lots* of sex!"

Ignoring them both, he thrust the kunai into Sakura's chest in a smooth and precise motion. He brought up his left arm to support her weight as she collapsed, watching as her face turned pale, and her breathing became laboured. Her body struggled to expel the blood that was flooding her airways, and her lips turned crimson. Itachi prayed as he never had before – for Pain to give the order soon, for her to be alright, for his sheer terror to be hidden from the rest.

After what felt like an agonizing eternity of watching her gurgle and drown in her own blood, Pain spoke. "Haruno Sakura. You may heal yourself."

There was no sign of the flare of green chakra which would indicate she had begun healing herself, and for one heart-stopping moment, Itachi thought she was too weakened to do so. And then, she looked to him, a question in her eyes. "A-an-ata," she choked out, struggling to form the words. Itachi quickly realised what she wanted, and nodded. "Yes. You may heal yourself," he said.

And then finally, finally, the tell-tale glow of medical ninjutsu surrounded her wound. As her strength returned to her, she placed her

hands over the wound, greatly speeding up the healing process. After a few more minutes, the only indication that she had nearly died in his arms was the bloodied rip in her yukata. She sagged against his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. "Thank you for allowing me to stay by your side longer," she said quietly.

Itachi redirected his gaze to Konan, unable to fully hide his rage. "Satisfied?" he asked. "Or do you require her to waste even more of her chakra on these ridiculous tests?"

Before Konan could speak, Tobi piped up. "Wow, Itachi-senpai! She listens to you so much! She must really really love you!"

None of the others appeared to notice Pain glancing towards Tobi before returning his gaze to Itachi, busy as they were with scoffing or gagging at Tobi's ridiculous comment. "Yes, Itachi," Pain said slowly. "You have done well with her indeed. What are your plans, moving forward?"

"I will allow her to recover her strength, and then use her abilities to heal my eyes. And then, I will take her on a circuit of the areas surrounding the major villages. We will not attempt to hide in any way, and I will ensure that she is spotted as my captive. I will begin with Kumo, since they have two jinchuriki in hiding with the kyuubi." Before Pain could speak, Itachi went on. "I will not bring anyone else with me. I have proved that I am sufficient to control her. Even as she was nearing death, she awaited my command before healing herself."

"Awwww! Tobi really wanted to get to know Sakura-san better! Itachi-senpai, it's really mean of you to keep her all to yourself!"

Itachi contemplated if any of the others would back him up if he attacked Tobi. Pain and Konan would not, as they were completely under his control. Kakuzu and Zetsu would stay uninvolved, and Sasori probably would as well. Deidara was hot-headed enough that his irritation with Tobi's exclamations would spur him to join Itachi. Kisame would surely back him up – he was certain that Tobi would have grated on even the easy-going man's nerves after the two of them had completed missions together. Hidan might join in for the fun of it as well, if he could be convinced that Jashin would appreciate Tobi's suffering.

"Itachi, you overstep," snapped Pain. "You may have a basis in thinking that you are sufficient, and that any other backup is unnecessary. However, Akatsuki has always worked in pairs, and this

will not be an exception to the rule.”

“Even when the plan has already been compromised once by incompetence?” Itachi returned. He was bordering on insubordination, but if he managed to get his way, it would be well worth the risk.

Deidara flushed. “Oi! Watch who you’re calling incompetent, un!”

Hidan let out an aggrieved sigh. “I don’t see what’s the fucking problem here. This is a bloody waste of time. If emo-boy wants to go by himself so that he and Pinky can fuck, I say let him go for it. I’d love to ditch that materialistic asshole Kakuzu once in a while too.”

Kakuzu rolled his eyes, but nodded. “It would be more efficient if we could to work solo once in a while. We could complete more missions and bring in more revenue, and I wouldn’t have some cultist botching jobs by mutilating bounties for his *Jashin-sama*.”

Kisame cut in before Hidan and Kakuzu’s argument could go down a road that they had all heard one too many times. “Leader-sama, as someone who has worked with Itachi-san for years, I can assure you that it is difficult for him to coordinate with just anyone. He works best alone. Especially where use of the Mangekyō is needed.”

Itachi was surprised. This was twice now that Kisame had backed him up, and this time, he’d basically lied to support Itachi. They had never had trouble coordinating. What was the man up to?

“A compromise, then,” Konan said. “After all, if the purpose is to be seen, what better way to draw attention than having a noticeable group of Akatsuki travelling together? Itachi will travel with the girl. Kisame and I will follow at a distance. We will be close enough to provide backup if it becomes necessary, but we will not be in his way and he can do as he pleases. If we are needed, Kisame is used to working with Itachi, and I am sure Itachi will have no objections to my presence, since you are the one who chose me to assist you, after all.”

Itachi almost growled in frustration when Pain voiced his support for Konan’s idea. He so rarely insisted on anything that whenever he did, he was always given leeway to do as he wished. His logic had always been accepted. He’d gambled that this would be one of those situations as well. But this time, the gamble had failed, and he had no real reason to disagree with Konan’s plan.

“This plan is acceptable to me,” he said, knowing he had been

defeated. To continue arguing would be pointless, and would only invite greater suspicion. “Konan-san, Kisame-san, we will meet tomorrow so I can brief you on the mission.” When they nodded, Itachi finally turned back to the kunoichi resting against him.

“Get up,” he said, all the while wishing he could carry her back to his rooms. It was because she was weakened from her near-death experience, he told himself.

After they re-entered his rooms, Sakura sank wearily onto the bed. Her eyes closed, and she massaged her forehead with her fingers. A few minutes later, her eyes opened, and Itachi was thankful to see that all traces of the woman she had been in front of the Akatsuki were gone. She was back.

“You deviated from our discussed plans,” he said calmly. She winced, and then glared. Itachi had never thought the sight of her fury would bring him so much comfort.

“I didn’t deviate!” she retorted. “Our plans were bare bones, and I just filled in the gaps!”

“Then why did you not point out said gaps earlier?”

She opened her mouth to respond, and closed it. She again rubbed her forehead, and took a few deep breaths. When she looked back up at him, she appeared noticeably calmer.

“I guess that’s my fault for not explaining how things work for me,” she said, sighing. “I... can’t really act. I get discovered easily. So when I’m in a situation which calls for deception, I basically cast a minor genjutsu on myself. I’m still there, inside my head, and I’m still watching everything that happens. But it’s almost like there’s a different Sakura, whoever is needed for the task, who takes control. And because it’s a different persona, I can’t control what she says and does once she takes over. All I can do is be as detailed as possible when I’m crafting the story behind her thought process, so that she acts how I need her to act.”

That sounded rather unorthodox. Part of him wondered if she was entirely sane. “It sounds like it would be taxing,” he said carefully. “Particularly since you would need to mask your use of chakra while casting this genjutsu, in case it is discovered and dispelled.”

She shook her head. “Not really. I pretty much already *have* a second

persona hanging out in my head – you met her, that time you tried to cast that genjutsu on me.”

“Yes. I recall she was rather violent,” he said wryly.

Sakura flushed. “Well, yeah. I’ve always had an excess of yin chakra, and it manifested mentally in my childhood as Inner Sakura. She... basically took on all the aspects of my personality I didn’t feel comfortable expressing. She became pretty quiet after I grew up a bit and learned to be myself, so she acts more like a mental guardian these days, protecting me from low-level genjutsu and stuff.”

He nodded, indicating that she should continue. This was highly fascinating. He’d heard of ninjas with chakra imbalances before – many of them treated it almost like a disability, using seals to siphon off the excess. Kisame, for example, used a seal to convert his excess water chakra to maintain his shark-like appearance. Itachi had never before met anyone who had managed to weaponize and find a sort of normalcy with their imbalanced chakra.

“So it makes things slightly easier on me since I’m already used to switching with Inner Sakura when I need her on occasion. For this, I just pull some of the yin chakra away from Inner Sakura to create new personas, and let them take charge. When you’re already used to one personality sharing your mind, another one or two in addition to me and Inner isn’t too much of an issue. A third one would be pushing it though. Maintaining the personas isn’t really a challenge – they stay dormant when I’m not using them, and until I dispel them. It’s switching between the personas that always gives me a headache.”

His blood ran cold as his mind finally finished sorting through the implications of what she had shared.

He’d been so naïve. He’d acknowledged her growth in strength from when she’d been Sasuke’s teammate, but his initial impression of her – that she was not a threat – had remained. And so, he had relaxed his guard, not questioning just how genuine she seemed. It was taxing to the mind to lie and to keep track of one’s deceptions, even for highly skilled actors. It was why his chosen tactic in the Akatsuki was to remain silent, and to appear disinterested. Based on how much at ease she had seemed with him, though, he had assumed every word out of her mouth was sincere. He had not known enough to even consider the possibility that she had a way of dealing with the cognitive load of maintaining a pretense, but he should have. His training and experience had taught him to never take anything for granted, and he

should never have assumed he knew everything about the abilities of a kunoichi in hostile territory.

So much for being an elite shinobi, skilled at looking underneath the underneath. He had taken her words and actions at face value, and therein lay his mistake.

A false persona, crafted to draw him in. Refined based on days of interaction with him, testing what he responded better to and what he pulled away from. It would explain what had appeared to be complete reversals in her personality, and in the way she acted toward him. He had realized she would be sharp-eyed, but he had not expected her to see through him so clearly, to realize how well he responded to sincerity. Her genuineness and vulnerability weren't an integral part of her after all. It was all an act. Her smiles, her friendship, her trust – *none of it was real.*

He could feel his muscles tensing, his fists clenching. He forced himself to relax. He could not afford to lose control now. Could not let her see that he was on to her act. He should be pleased. This meant she still viewed him as a threat, that his cover was safe. And he had no doubt he could defend himself against whatever attack she might launch against him. She might be skilled, but he was practiced at keeping himself alive as a missing-nin with no true allies.

And yet, the realization that while she had invaded his mind and taken over his life, he probably had no such effect on her in turn... It hurt. As did the thought that she would not feel any sadness for his death.

He wondered if this tightness in his chest, this feeling of drowning, of being completely untethered from reality, was how Sasuke had felt when Itachi had told him he'd only pretended to be a caring brother. For the first time in ten years, he felt guilt for stripping the certainty of his love from his brother.

Chapter End Notes

It's always going to be one step forward, one step back with these two huh? Poor Itachi - he's lived in a hostile situation for so long that he can't help but jump to the worst possible conclusion!

Just A Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Every time Sakura attempted to close her eyes, she was assaulted by images and sensations. Konan, who had initially pretended she cared about Sakura's welfare, giving an order for her to be stabbed. Struggling to breathe, feeling the life seep out of her, resisting the instinctive need to heal herself until she was given permission to do so. The very idea made her sick, that somebody else had needed to give her the go-ahead to heal *her own* body. And worst of all – that cold, soulless expression on Itachi's face as he drove the kunai into her chest.

Why had she allowed herself to dismiss the fact that he had murdered innocents – *elderly, children*, in cold blood? Why had it been so easy for her to insist that the gentle demeanour he sometimes displayed in private was his true self?

Because he's hot and you're lonely, Inner Sakura supplied unhelpfully, bringing up just how damn good he smelled, of campfires and rainy mornings in the forests, how she could have happily spent an eternity nuzzling and kissing his throat. And that was not forgetting the warmth that had encapsulated her when she'd snuggled into his chest after healing herself. It was as if all her daydreams of Sasuke had come true, only this was a Sasuke who had the capacity to be kind and sweet, and actually spoke in full sentences instead of grunts.

That's enough from you, Sakura growled at Inner. Her fingers reached up to brush against the necklace he'd fastened around her before they had gone to meet the Akatsuki. She knew why he'd done it, of course. It was a clear sign of his possession over her, especially given that most ninja preferred to use necklaces to symbolize commitment, rather than rings as civilians did. After all, hands were a shinobi's greatest weapon, and few shinobi would willingly compromise their weapons in any way by adding unnecessary accessories to them.

But what she didn't know was why she hadn't asked him if he wanted it back after they were back to his rooms.

She sighed deeply.

She was lying to herself. No, she knew alright.

She just didn't want to admit how she longed for it to mean something. For the Itachi who had fastened the necklace around her to be the real one. For him to be the kind, curious, and tender man she was catching glimpses of with increasing frequency as the days passed, the man she had trusted to touch her neck unhindered, and for him to feel for her as she was beginning to feel for him. She knew she was confusing her feelings for Sasuke with her utter dependence on Itachi, and it was leading her into dangerous territory, mooning over him and his beautiful features like the lovesick fangirl she had not been for years.

How was he able to switch between the psychopathic killer and perfect boyfriend material so quickly and completely? It really was as if there were two people residing in the same body. Frustrated with how she was vacillating between being shaken by terror and daydreaming about him, she let out a growl and ripped the sheets off herself, and stalked over to the table.

She was falling back into old habits, waiting for fate to give her answers and for others to rescue her. She was no longer that girl, and she had to hold on to that resolve. *Something, I need to do something to take control of this situation again*, she thought, shivering at the memory of how casually the other members of the Akatsuki had discussed what to do with her. As if she were an object, and not a person. It had frightened her how close a shave she'd had with death – if Itachi's aim had not been as precise, if Pain had taken any longer to give the order... she might not have been able to heal herself.

An idea struck her, and she retrieved a few materials, including the chakra paper and inks that Itachi had begun leaving in a place she could access. Yet another instance of him being a thoughtful bastard. She gritted her teeth, and did her best to put Uchiha Itachi out of her head, and focused on the seal she was crafting. It was time to prepare her insurance. She would be damned if she would give the Akatsuki any chance at all to decide her fate once they realized Naruto wasn't taking the bait. She knew she had a death sentence, but it would be *on her own terms*.

Ten years ago, Itachi's soul had perished together with his clan. There was nothing left except to wait for his body to join his soul and his family in death.

Or so he had thought.

After his realization that he had allowed Sakura to play him like an instrument, it dawned on him that he wasn't quite as deadened to the world as he thought himself to be. His eyes fixed on her, working feverishly on something by candlelight. Whatever it was, it involved her box of herbs and his chakra paper and inks. Against his will, his eyes drifted to the metal fastened around her throat.

He swallowed as the memory overtook him.

"Shisui, what is this?" asked an exasperated Itachi. Somehow, his cousin had gotten wind of the fact that Itachi had joined ANBU, and had insisted on giving him a congratulatory gift. On seeing the cardboard box, Itachi had hoped it was his favourite dango, even though he could not detect any smells that would indicate that it was.

He was sorely disappointed when he realized it was a simple metal necklace. What would he even do with it?

"The great Uchiha Itachi, youngest ANBU recruit, doesn't know what a necklace is?" Shisui teased. Itachi fixed him with a glare.

Snickering, Shisui went on. "My dear Itachi-chan, now that you are all grown up, it's time for you to start exploring the wonderful world of women! Or men, if that's your preference. You're too stoic, and you dress too plainly. So, your dear Shisui-nii decided to help you look cooler so that you can attract whomever your heart desires!"

The eleven-year-old glared even more ferociously. "Shisui. I have neither the time nor the inclination to engage in the... explorations you suggest."

"Ahh, Itachi-chan! You may think this way now. But rest assured that there will come a day where a pretty girl or boy will catch your eye, and you will thank your Shisui-nii for making you ready for that day!"

On Shisui's insistent nagging, Itachi had reluctantly gotten into the habit of wearing the necklace. And then, after his beloved cousin's death, it had become his last physical tie to his only friend.

It had taken much deliberation before he'd decided to give the necklace to Sakura. He'd told himself that dead men did not need accessories, and that it would serve a greater purpose in indicating her relationship to him. He'd agreed with her assessment that it could only help to have more visual cues that tied her to him.

Yet, when he'd fastened it around her neck, it had somehow taken on a different meaning. He had not thought of strategy, and he had not thought about the act they were about to undertake. His thoughts had instead been consumed by her, that frustrating herbal scent, and how desperately he wanted her to come out of the encounter with the other Akatsuki members unscathed. All he could think of was the significance of a male shinobi placing a necklace on a kunoichi, how she was integrating herself into his life, somehow becoming as important as Shisui once had been. He'd decided then on impulse that it would be his gift to her, a symbol that he would care for her wellbeing as Shisui had safeguarded his sanity until his untimely death.

Now, though, with the certainty of her deception still fresh in his mind... He felt as if he'd swallowed something vile, but he still couldn't bring himself to regret the decision to give her Shisui's necklace, hasty and unconsidered though it had been. She may have deceived him, but his convictions had been true. Still were true.

It doesn't matter, he told himself. I will still uphold the promises I made. And she has stood by her promises so far as well. I should admire her resourcefulness – using your wiles to convert an enemy into an ally is a strategy that requires intelligence to think of, and finesse to pull off. If she managed to fool even me, she surely will be a formidable ally to have against Tobi.

There was no room in his plans for the rushing tide of emotions within him. He was a shinobi, a tool. He would push down this irrational anger and whatever else that he was feeling, and proceed with his plans.

He'd almost managed to convince himself of that when his Sharingan-sharpened eyes detected her picking up the pouch which he knew contained her supply of deadly blackwort. And then, she brought it closer, as if she was going to place it in her mouth –

Itachi moved so quickly he was not even aware of making the decision to intervene.

He ripped the blackwort from her hands and tossed it onto the table, and pushed her chair against the wall. He pinned both her wrists to the wall. There was no need to immobilize her legs, he decided.

“What do you think you are doing?” he hissed, feeling a sense of déjà vu for the last time he had assumed she was making a suicide attempt.

Although, he supposed there was less of a likelihood that she would be conducting an experiment this time.

She glared at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Itachi, I swear if you make one more comment about me going back on my promises – "

"Are your oaths the only reason I would have to wonder why you would ingest such a fast-acting poison?" he replied coolly, cutting her off. "Would it not be *in character* for a friend to be concerned about your welfare?" Internally, he winced. He had not intended to allow so much of his own bitterness to slip through.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, before she shook her head in frustration. "Just cut the passive-aggressive crap and say whatever it is you're trying to imply, Itachi! I *really* don't have the patience to deal with all your insinuations right now."

He schooled his face back into its impassive mask. He could not afford to betray his emotions, lest she realize just how much of a hold she had over him.

"I asked you what you were doing. You responded with a challenge rather than answering. I believed we were beyond such petty things," he replied evenly.

"Let go of me, and I'll tell you," she snapped. He released her wrists and took a step back, still watching her for any sudden movements.

She looked up at him, and let out a sardonic laugh. "Funny isn't it, how we seem to keep ending up in these situations where we're demanding explanations from each other? Everything we've tried – making oaths, affirming friendship – nothing's worked so far."

He waited. She was stalling, and he would not allow her to distract him. He would have answers.

Realizing that he would not be so easily side-tracked, she sighed. "It's my insurance," she mumbled.

He raised an eyebrow in inquiry, waiting for her to elaborate.

"I'm going to die here," she said quietly, her voice cracking, and he watched as her eyes filled with tears. He suppressed the inappropriate urge to take her into his arms and comfort her. She cleared her throat, wiped her eyes, and went on. "Eventually, they'll realize Naruto isn't coming. And then, they'll dispose of me. I heard some of those plans

today. Making me into a puppet – at least, that’s what I assume Sasori meant when he was going on about me becoming an enduring work of art. Collecting the bounty on me. Sacrificing me. I won’t allow that to happen,” she said, her voice gaining fierceness with her last sentence.

“I won’t allow myself to be used against my home, my precious people, in any way. I considered immediate suicide, of course, but that seemed premature. As much as I like to think I’ve accepted my own death, I can’t deny that I’m still hoping that I can live through this ordeal. And anyway, if staying alive longer helps me secure your cooperation, then it’s worth it. Any advantages I can give Konoha with my life is worth it.”

He sorted through everything she had said, and took in the seal she had crafted. It was complicated, but he could make out a few elements, and it was enough to enlighten him to her plan. “You’re going to seal the poison within yourself,” he said quietly. “And when you deem it necessary, you will activate it. Instant death.”

She nodded. “I needed something quick. I wouldn’t put it past them to be able to put me in a state of stasis.” She seemed to suddenly realize something – her entire body jerked. “You can’t stop me,” she said, the urgency and fervour evident in her tone. “I know you promised to protect me as far as you can, but if I activate the poison, you need to know that it’s because I made an assessment that it was too risky for me to continue living. Please don’t do anything to stop me. Just let me die,” she begged.

“How could you just give up?” he demanded in spite of himself. “You are not powerless. You have *me* by your side. You could make it out alive.”

She smiled wryly. “Didn’t you wonder why I was so willing to trust you, even though I know your history? It’s because you say things like this. You act like you don’t care, and then you go on to say things like this.” She got up and walked towards him. She took his hands in hers. “You’re the last person I will ever connect with,” she whispered. “Thank you for giving me that. For not letting my last days be filled with loneliness. Even if it was just an act, thank you for all those times you have been kind, and shown me care. And who knows, right? Naruto is amazing at bringing people to his side with love and openness. Maybe I can do something like that. Maybe you’ll remember me with fondness. I’m not naïve enough to think I’m enough for you to let go of everything you probably hold against Konoha and against your clan, but maybe it’ll be enough to start re-building those

bridges.”

She tiptoed, and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Itachi,” she murmured.

He watched mutely as she picked up the seal she had drawn and wrapped it around the pouch. The ink spread, and the seal activated, turning the entire pouch into an indistinct mass that would blend in with the inside of her mouth. She then placed the pouch inside her mouth, maneuvering it against her cheek. He sensed a flare of chakra, and assumed she must have used hers to adhere the pouch to her cheek. The Sharingan was not like the Byakugan, after all. He could not see the chakra flows within her body to know for sure.

Itachi was powerless to stop her. What could he say? That he would fight the entire Akatsuki for her? If he could have, he would have put a stop to their activities years ago. He could not reveal his plans to get her out safely either. As much as he admired her sacrifice, what guarantee did he have that she would not betray his plans to Konan if she assessed that it would give her more advantages?

He felt a deep shame well up within him, and simultaneously felt his heart shatter into a million pieces. *She is like me*, he realized. She was willing to engineer her own death for the sake of her loved ones, and for the hope that things could be better. How could he fault her for using whatever tools she had at her disposal to make her death worth something? Wasn't it something he himself was planning? He'd ruined Sasuke's life, knowingly twisted him into an avenger all so that he could erase the stain on the Uchiha name, and be revered as a hero. He'd all but ordered him to kill his best friend, knowing that Konoha would need the Mangekyō in the conflict against whatever Tobi was planning.

He turned away so that she could not see the bitter smile that twisted itself about his lips. Turnabout was fair play, he supposed. There was a sort of justice in that he was experiencing a similar pain to what he had inflicted on Sasuke. He tried to accept her decision, that she too, would proudly die for love. And yet, the very idea made a surge of indignation and distaste rise up within him. His hands were stained with blood that could never be atoned for. His plans had been set in motion years ago. He had no choice but to accept the fate he was chained to. But she did not have to.

Not if he had anything to say about it.

He was a shinobi, a tool for his village. And he had also crafted himself into a tool for Sasuke. Surely, he could allow himself to be a tool for Sakura as well. He could allow her to manipulate him and use him as she needed, so that she could return home safely with nothing more than the memory of the time she had outwitted Uchiha Itachi.

The next morning, Sakura heaved a sigh of relief once Itachi left for his meeting with Konan and Kisame. Things had gotten... intense the previous night, to say the least, and she needed some space from him to reconsider her feelings towards him. She'd been resolved to hold him at arms' length, but the instant he'd expressed concern for her, said she *had him by her side*, all her determination had melted away. Kami, she'd practically confessed her budding feelings to the man! She was thankful that he had either been too focused on her suicide plan to notice, or had been too polite to mention it.

She was also relieved that he had not questioned her too deeply on the mechanics of how her seal worked. He seemed to think it would require a deliberate action from her to activate the poison. But Sakura had not been willing to take the chance that she would be rendered unconscious or drained of chakra and unable to follow through. Instead, she'd crafted the seal so that it required a constant stream of chakra to keep it going, similar to the standard seals kunoichi used to regulate their cycles. If there ever came a time when she was drained of chakra and the chakra flow to the seal stopped, the seal would disintegrate and the poison would enter her system. From there, it would only take a couple of minutes for her to die.

It would be simple enough to activate the poison even if she wasn't drained of chakra. Her chakra control was proficient enough that she could deliberately stop the flow just to the seal, causing the same effect. She was safe. She would not be used against Konoha. And Itachi did not know just how simple it was for her death to take effect – he would not be able to stop her.

She summoned Katsuyu, desperately hoping that Tsunade had managed to put the files she'd requested together. Katsuyu had informed her that there appeared to be some missing information from Itachi's files, and there would be a delay in getting them to her. Tsunade would write back to her when she'd found everything, but in the meantime, Sakura was to continue relaying any pertinent information.

She hoped again that today would be the day she would get a look at

Itachi's psychological reports. At least having some solid information could help her figure out her next steps.

Sakura,

I'm so, so glad you're okay. Focus on keeping yourself alive and well – I'll worry about everything else. Be careful. Allowing you to communicate may be a ruse to monitor our communications and plant false information. We've been dodging encounters with Akatsuki for years at this point – I would not be surprised if their plans have multiple layers to them.

I must be honest with you, I thought Uchiha must have had you under a genjutsu or forced you to write that note under duress. But I looked into his files anyway and well... You may be on to something. I've given you the copies of all documents we have on him and the massacre. Let me know if anything strikes you as noteworthy.

Understand that I have given you everything we have, Sakura. No documents have been held back or misplaced. This is all there is. It's taken me so long to get this to you because I wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else.

There's also a spy for Konoha within the Akatsuki. If you can, establish contact with them. They may be able to help you get out.

- Tsunade

Sakura frowned. She noticed that her shishou had not mentioned exactly *what* it was that had changed her mind. It was as if she was questioning her own conclusions and wanted to see if Sakura came to the same ones on examining the files.

Looking through the documents, she quickly understood what Tsunade had found so odd. Itachi's psychological reports from his time in ANBU described a completely different person from the psychological profile written in the wake of the massacre. One described a shinobi who had all the traits that would recommend him for greater things – loyalty to Konoha, the ability to carry out his missions with efficiency and minimal injury to all parties involved, the desire and ability to protect his comrades. It was completely at odds with the other report, which painted a bloodthirsty and cruel murderer who delighted in the hunt. They described the exact dichotomy she'd observed for herself on multiple occasions.

She dug into the thick pile of autopsy reports. It didn't make sense.

They described a completely different murder from the one the psychological profile described. Almost all the Uchihas were killed with cuts that would have ensured quick, painless deaths. And at this point, she had the personal experience of being stabbed by Itachi to back up her conviction that his aim was incredibly precise. Whatever cuts he had made were fully intentional.

Sakura set the reports aside. More than ever, she wished Itachi had not stopped leaving Akuma-chan behind when he left the room. It had made thinking easier, having even a crow to talk to. Now, she had to content herself with mulling things over in her head.

While the average person without specialized knowledge could certainly look at the autopsy reports and conclude that the perpetrator had delighted in the bloodshed, Sakura knew otherwise. And she knew that the shinobi assigned to investigate the crime should have been able to realize the same. This narrative of a highly skilled prodigy who had snapped under stress and had turned to the sheer joy of killing just did not gel with the actual evidence.

It was almost as if there was a conspiracy involved. Someone was trying to make Itachi appear to be far more villainous than he actually was.

She exhaled. Perhaps her impulses where he was concerned – taking his hands in hers, kissing him – were not completely idiotic after all.

She turned to the reports of all engagements with Itachi after his defection, and realized that there were only two – one from Itachi's sojourn into Konoha after the invasion, and one when Itachi had tried to nab Naruto from Jiraiya's custody soon after.

That was it? Even failed retrieval missions where all teammates were killed should have been documented with mission briefs and statements on the last known positions and status of the team. And there was no way they hadn't sent squads to neutralize a rogue-nin with crimes as serious as Itachi's, or with a doujutsu as powerful as the Sharingan. Even Orochimaru had been relentlessly pursued until the trail had gone cold. And Sakura *knew* that Itachi's Bingo Book entry had a flee on sight designation. How the hell had that even been approved when no squads had been sent after him? She found it hard to believe that such a designation would have been permitted based on other village's assessments, or purely based on the abilities he'd displayed while in ANBU.

She turned back to Tsunade's letter – *'Understand that I have given you everything we have, Sakura. No documents have been held back or misplaced. This is all there is.'* Shishou must have been equally puzzled by the lack of retrieval missions.

She massaged her forehead. It felt as if everything she'd thought she'd known about her village was an illusion.

Suddenly, a thought struck her. The way Tsunade had mentioned a spy for Konoha within Akatsuki *had* been rather abrupt.

Could Itachi be Konoha's spy?

Itachi sagged as Konan finally left the room. It had been a long three hours. She'd questioned him on his every decision and instruction. Her suspicion was deep indeed. She must think he intended on using Sakura against Pain somehow – he'd always had the impression that she cared little for Tobi, and that all her loyalty was to Pain.

And now that he was alone with Kisame, he had some things to ask his partner. It was a risk, he knew. From all his years travelling with the nin, he'd realized that Kisame was highly motivated by ensuring the confidentiality of information. The man despised those who traded in secrets with a passion, even though dealing with informants was a necessary practice in their line of work.

So if Kisame had any suspicions at all that Itachi's loyalty was not to Akatsuki, and that he was leaking information... well. It would be better for Itachi to know sooner rather than later.

He glanced at Kisame, and the man nodded. They'd worked together long enough that they could communicate through glances. Itachi activated a genjutsu so that they could speak in private. He was not taking any chances that Konan might have left any spying devices behind.

"Itachi-san," Kisame said. "Anything in particular you wanted to discuss?"

Itachi cut straight to the chase. Kisame disliked dancing around topics, and preferred for communication to be straightforward. "You lied to Leader-sama yesterday about my ability to coordinate. Why?"

Kisame grinned. "Can't you just accept a favour from your partner?"

“What makes you so sure that I would view it as a favour?”

Kisame snorted. “I’d have to be blind not to notice. You clearly wanted to have alone time with your girl. I was just helping you out.”

Itachi blinked. He had... not been expecting that.

Kisame laughed uproariously at his expression. “Kid, you really thought your motivations weren’t obvious, huh?”

Itachi felt uneasy. Had he given himself away? At least Kisame seemed to think his motivations were purely of the romantic nature. Still, it would not require a large leap of logic to move from an attachment to a Konoha kunoichi to an attachment to Konoha itself. Was that why Konan was so suspicious of him?

“What gave me away?” he asked finally. Perhaps it was not too late to rectify it.

Kisame smiled. “Your secret’s safe, kid. You forget that I’ve watched you grow from a reclusive teenager to an even more reclusive adult. I’ve never known you to use sex as a weapon. I’ve been there from your first seduction mission, and I know that you always used genjutsu to complete those. And don’t think I’ve noticed that you haven’t even had a dalliance in a while.”

Itachi nodded, troubled. Of course he had stopped having sexual relations with women. It did nothing to ease the emptiness within him, and there was no point. Still, for Kisame to have noticed...

“So yeah, I knew from the start that all that stuff about you raping her and interrogating her was a load of crap. I figured at first that you wanted to keep her safe for your brother, since you said they were teammates and all. After the amount of time that we’ve spent together, I know that you still love him, even though you act like you couldn’t care less. But then I saw how you interacted with her yesterday. And you gave her your necklace, kid. I’ve never seen you take the thing off, ever. She must be something special, hmm? Especially if she’s playing along with this whole victim thing of yours.”

Itachi exhaled. It appeared that whatever Kisame noticed had been borne by their long association and close proximity. It was time to steer this conversation to an end.

“You are supportive?” he asked.

“You know I am,” Kisame laughed. “Our lives are meaningless, so if you’ve found someone to love, and who loves you, then why not enjoy it for a while?”

Itachi stilled. He should really just let it go, let it end there. “Who said anything about love?”

Kisame snorted. “Please. You didn’t exactly look unhappy when she had her hands all over you. And you might have fooled everyone else when you stabbed her, but I’ve worked with you long enough to know your tells. You were worried when Leader-sama took his own time to give her permission to heal herself. Whatever you’re feeling, if it’s not love, it’s still serious enough.”

Kisame hesitated a moment, and went on. “I might be overstepping here. You know I’ve always respected you, and I follow your lead in public. But... you can’t be together with someone for as long as we have and not feel something. I’m telling you this because you’re the closest thing I have to a brother. I know you have a whole load of baggage, and you think you have to carry everything on your shoulders. But you’re just a man. Happiness has fallen into your lap. You should take it.”

Itachi froze. Kisame stopped and restarted his flow of chakra, dispelling the genjutsu. Nodding to Itachi, he picked up Samehada and took his leave. Itachi continued to sit, turning Kisame’s words over in his head.

Love. Was that what he felt for Sakura? Was that why his entire being shied away from seeing her in pain? Was that why his gut churned whenever he contemplated that she might just be using him, and that everything she had expressed was insincere?

It made sense. He realized with dread that Kisame was right. He, who was already imprisoned to another fate, had dared fall in love with someone he should never covet. She loved his brother, he remembered with a sickening lurch. Fate indeed had an apt sense of humour, to dangle such a temptation before him at such a crucial juncture. To hear that he should seize happiness... he wanted to laugh at the cruel irony of it all.

Chapter End Notes

All the stuff about necklaces was inspired by the Hindu tradition of Mangala sutra! It's basically an auspicious thread that a man ties around a woman's neck as part of wedding ceremonies, kind

of like the usual ring exchange. I thought it would be cool to play with other types of traditions, especially given the ninja lifestyle.

Anyway, my headcannon of Itachi is that he's a total drama queen, and I think that really showed in this chapter XD I mean, honestly. Man basically sat on a throne waiting for Sasuke. And all the speeches he made about how Sasuke had to increase his hatred!

Overcast Skies

As Itachi climbed the stairs that led to his quarters, his heart pounded. His mind worked in overdrive, creating plans, strategies, and discarding them as quickly as they came.

He could have a strictly physical relationship with her – he could begin by kissing her again... No, he should continue with his current plan of treating her like a mission partner. No, he could earn her trust, he would not lay a hand on her unless necessary, but he could deepen their emotional connection. No, he was just wound up, it had been too long, he should go find some other woman to be with and get these feelings was out of his system –

He paused, one foot hovering over the next step. That final thought was the most distasteful one of the lot. He took a breath, attempting to settle his mind and gather his thoughts. He was being hasty, recklessly considering half-formed plans in an attempt to extinguish the feelings churning within him. That was unacceptable. It could put himself, his plans for Sasuke, and Sakura herself at risk.

Looking at the situation from an objective perspective, nothing had actually changed from that morning. Except gaining a name for the emotions, a reason for the rash impulses he was unused to dealing with. His strength as a shinobi came from calm, clinical consideration of his options, and his ability to bend himself toward the best course, no matter how unpleasant he found it.

And his emotions where Sakura was concerned were troubling indeed, both in their magnitude and the suddenness with which they'd taken over him. Itachi had always known he was a man of intense emotions despite the stoic and indifferent demeanour he had shown the world. Both Sasuke and Shisui had become immensely important to him within the space of minutes, and he knew it made him vulnerable to care for people with such fervour. He'd done his best to guard himself against forming any further attachments, even though it made his life so empty. It was a weakness he could ill afford.

But his fierce desire to protect her, coupled with his respect for her intelligence, passion, sheer willpower, and determination... yes, he supposed it was not that surprising that he had fallen completely in love within the space of days.

He had to tread carefully. He knew from his studies of the Uchiha

ancestors' writings that Uchiha with intense emotional attachments were the ones likelier to have stronger Sharingan eyes, given the extent of the trauma that would accompany the losses associated with such intense love. He, who held a Mangekyō Sharingan, and one capable of all the three most powerful jutsus no less... he was highly susceptible to the Curse of Hatred indeed.

He would stick to his current course. Pursuing Sakura was a distraction, especially given that he had no way of knowing whether the woman he found so enthralling even existed. Everything he loved could be crafted as part of the persona she was playing for him. Speculating on the matter would only make him more susceptible to going down a dark path where he succumbed to the Uchiha Curse of Hatred, where he would be consumed by his own rage and his judgement would be compromised.

He would continue to gather information, he would continue to use Sakura to relay information to Konoha and to ensure Sasuke returned home, and he would allow himself to be used by Sakura in whatever ways she deemed necessary, so long as it did not interfere with his primary objective. Decision made, he continued with steady strides to his quarters, flaring his chakra to announce to Sakura that he was back.

As he opened the door, he found her hastily packing away a set of papers, bundling them together with the same strings she had used on all her items. He frowned. He did not recognize that bundle. It had not been among any of her items. It must either be her original work, or she had already found a way to establish contact with Konoha and even gain materials from them.

She looked up at him and grinned widely. It seemed... off, somehow. "Itachi! Just the person I wanted to see," she said. "I wanted to ask you about some of the seals you had on your walls – there were some elements I couldn't recognize."

He kept his face blank while he sorted through her speech and mannerisms. She was trying to make him think she'd been working on her research, he realized. Hence the abrupt question about his seals, instead of what would have been more natural queries about his meeting, given that the details discussed with Konan and Kisame would affect her directly. She must *really* not want him to know what was in those papers. Despite the false cheer on her face, there was a note of worry in her voice. He was certain he would be able to spot other tells as well, if his eyesight was functioning fully, but there was

no need in this instance. He spotted enough to know when he was being deceived. It was yet another stab to his heart.

“Drop the act, Sakura-san,” he said harshly. He needed to nip this in the bud, did not want her to think she could get away with lying to him. “If you do not wish to share what you were working on, that is your business. I will not interfere unless I perceive you to be foolishly risking yourself. But do not lie to me again.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “It’s just... well, I would hardly have expected you to be okay with me keeping things from you. And I really can’t share this with you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Cannot, or will not?”

She sighed deeply, her shoulders drooping even further. “Will not. I’m sorry, Itachi. There are important reasons –“

“That hardly matters to me,” he replied in a clipped tone, ignoring the ache within him. “The distinction between your ability and your choice was all that was needed.”

She flinched, as if she had been slapped. Itachi turned away, feeling like a monster. He needed to reel his emotions in. He’d spoken almost instinctively, wanting to wound her as she had hurt him with her lies and distrust. Once the words were out there, however, his natural disinclination to cause pain, together with the fervent compulsion to keep *her* from experiencing hurt, ate away at him. Regret was bitter medicine indeed.

Fool. She’s preparing herself for death. For all you know, those could be personal papers, and you are acting like a child because she will not share them with you? Remember your resolve. Kill the attachment. Do not become consumed by the Curse of Hatred. Remember that it is Sasuke she loves. Not you. She has no reason to care for you.

“You’re angry,” she said quietly. He remained silent. Distance, he needed more distance from her. Engaging would only ensnare him within her charms again, and throw him back into the whirlpool he was desperately trying to swim out of.

She moved to stand next to him, facing out the window. She tentatively reached a hand out towards him, but on seeing his expression, appeared to think better of it. “I don’t know if there’s anything I can say or do right now to make things better,” she said finally. “I’m scared I’ll just make things worse. Can we... move past

this? And talk about our plans? Maybe you could tell me what happened at your meeting?”

He gratefully accepted her olive branch like the salvation it was. “We leave tomorrow,” he said, turning back to her. He sat down on the bed to give himself some physical distance, shoving aside the guilt that surged through him at her relieved expression. “Konan and Kisame will trail us by a one-kilometre distance at all times.”

“That’s not very far,” she murmured. Most ninja could close that gap within two minutes. With Konan’s ability to fly, however, and Kisame’s incredible stamina and chakra...

“Yes,” he agreed. “They can catch up to us within thirty seconds.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “Under what circumstances would they close the distance?”

“Anytime Konan judges that their presence is needed,” he said, not bothering to hide his irritation. In all the years he’d been with Akatsuki, it had mostly been Pain and Tobi he’d had to focus on out-maneuvering. He’d also been on the offensive then, slowing down their plans. He was unused to being the one on the defensive. In addition, Konan’s constant interference was unexpected. In hindsight, he should never have chosen her to be his partner. Kisame would have been a far better choice.

“I would assume that would happen whenever she senses any suspicious chakra flares. Although, I did insist that there may be times we may need to handle situations delicately, without her presence. I will signal her by flaring my chakra in a certain pattern, and she will send one of her paper jutsus to scope out the situation.”

Sakura groaned, picking up one of Itachi’s pillows and stuffing her face in it. When she looked back up, she met Itachi’s confused eyes. “I just realised,” she grumbled, tossing the pillow carelessly back onto the bed. “I’m going to have to be Brainwashed Sakura for *the entire trip* if they’re going to keep so close, and if we have to be ready for spying devices. I’m not sure I’m going to make it out of this alive – even if you manage to hold back from murdering me, I don’t think I could.”

Itachi felt his lips quirk upwards in amusement, despite how close to her belief in her impending death the joke hit. Of all the things to complain about... “She’s not my favourite Sakura either,” he acknowledged.

Sakura's eyes sparkled. "And since Inner Sakura punched you in the face the one time you met her, I assume I'm the favourite then?"

"It's not that much of a victory," he replied, still amused at her glee. It was really incredible how just a few words from her could turn his entire mood around.

She snorted. "I'll take what I can get. I'll need the advantage when Inner starts on about – "

She paused, her skin turning a delicious shade of red. He desperately wanted to know what was it that made her so embarrassed.

"Anyway," she said, clearing her throat, obviously eager to return to the previous topic. "What *are* Konan's papers capable of, precisely? I remember the rose was an eavesdropping jutsu, right?"

He shook his head, wishing he could have continued teasing her. "The form of the paper has nothing to do with its capability," he explained. "That's just a red herring she uses to confuse enemies. In any case, I'm only aware of two different types of her jutsu – one that is capable of listening to conversations, and one that is able to detect chakra flows. I am unaware if she is capable of combining them. I am also unaware of what combat applications her paper jutsu may have."

"Do you think it's possible for you to get me a sample of the two different types actually?" Sakura asked. "If I can feel them using my chakra, I'll be able to differentiate them later based on the chakra signature the paper emits."

Itachi felt his eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "You're a sensory type?"

"Not exactly," Sakura hedged. "It's a technique I developed based on medical ninjutsu." As she explained how she emitted low-level chakra to detect its interaction with jutsus in the environment, he once again found himself becoming impressed with her.

"You truly are talented," he breathed in amazement. "You've managed to apply chakra creatively in so many ways."

She scowled. "I'm not talented. I'm *skilled*," she said pointedly, almost challenging him to clarify what she meant. It was unnecessary, though. He understood her meaning. She wanted him to understand that she had developed her techniques through her ingenuity and long hours of practice. To call her talented would be to devalue her efforts. He'd felt the same, after all, when all of his accomplishments had been

attributed to his inborn talents rather than the excruciating training regimen he had put himself through in pursuit of excellence.

“Indeed,” he murmured. “I stand corrected, Sakura-san. You are highly skilled, and I am awed by your intelligence, tenacity, and creativity.” She flushed with pleasure this time, he realized, noting the small smile that played about her lips. He felt a rush of satisfaction – finally, he was making her happy rather than hurting her feelings.
Stop. Kill the attachment.

“In any case, I cannot bring samples to you. However, there are plenty of Konan’s paper angels around the village, and I’m quite certain of their purposes. We can go take a look at them, and you could use those to feel what sort of resonance each jutsu emits.”

Her smile grew even wider. She sashayed over to him, and sat down on his lap, arms wrapped around his neck. Itachi stiffened at the sudden contact, relaxing only when she looked up at him, batting her eyelashes outrageously in what was clearly supposed to be a parody of her previous performance. “Anata, you’re taking me out on a date at last!” she squealed. She then laughed at his expression, and got up. “Sorry about that,” she giggled. “I was just really excited about going outside and getting some fresh air, even if I have to go out as Brainwashed Sakura. It’s been *forever*.”

She didn’t need to apologize at all. Even if it had been for the sake of making a joke, she had come to him. And she had laughed. And it was *her*, the Sakura he’d fallen for. He could not quite tamp down the euphoria he felt coursing through his veins.

Of all the people they could run into on their way onto the streets of Ame, it just had to be Tobi. Itachi had to concentrate on keeping his hands steady, rather than pushing Sakura behind him and away from the man.

“Itachi-senpai! Sakura-san!” he greeted. “Isn’t your mission only supposed to begin tomorrow! You are going out now? Can Tobi come with you? Tobi promises to be a good boy!”

Itachi consciously kept his posture loose. He would not allow Tobi to sense his tension, even though the older man would certainly be aware of it. Thankfully, Sakura – or rather, Brainwashed Sakura, as Sakura referred to the persona – saved him from needing to respond.

“Awww, Tobi! You’re so adorable,” she squealed, reaching up to ruffle

his hair. Tobi squawked in what Itachi supposed was delight, though it was rather unclear.

“I’d love to have you with us,” Sakura went on, “though maybe another time?” She lowered her voice to a stage-whisper. “Shujin is bringing me on our first date! And I would love for it to be just the two of us for this time,” she said, turning around to give Itachi yet another adoring look.

“A date!” Tobi cried. “Oh, wow! That’s so romantic! Where is he taking you?”

Sakura giggled. “We’re just going shopping for supplies for the mission, Tobi. And then, maybe if I’m persuasive enough, I can get Shujin to have dinner with me too,” she said, winking.

“Tobi wishes Sakura-san good luck!”

“Awwww, thanks Tobi! Aren’t you adorable,” Sakura gushed, and reached for his mask. Tobi jumped back.

“Sakura-san! What are you doing?” he demanded, still maintaining his jovial tone.

“I just wanted to pinch your cheeks, Tobi! After all, you’re a good boy, aren’t you?” Itachi found himself rather pleased at Sakura’s ability to handle him.

“No, Sakura-san! Please do not pinch Tobi’s cheeks! Tobi is a good boy, but Tobi is also very shy!”

“Then come on, at least let me have a hug,” Sakura laughed. Itachi watched, stunned, as the orange-masked man actually allowed himself to be pulled into said hug. He was sure Sakura was doing this for a reason, but he’d had a couple of opportunities to watch Tobi fight, both during the Uchiha massacre and back when he had attacked Itachi’s genin team. And both times, Tobi had used some kind of jutsu to ensure that none of their attacks could connect with him. Based on what Itachi had observed, he had managed to pull off the jutsu with ease.

Had Sakura managed to disconcert him so much that he allowed her to make physical contact with him?

Thankfully, Tobi was unsettled enough by Sakura’s behaviour that he soon scuttled off, and Itachi and Sakura were able to leave the base

with no further interruptions.

It was as if the whole world had conspired to give Sakura the perfect day out, she thought, lifting her head to the skies and feeling the breeze on her skin for the first time in days. She breathed deeply, taking in the typical scents of a village... which honestly were not the most pleasing scents, she admitted. Still, it was something *different*. The skies were overcast, which in any other place would not mean much, but she supposed that in Ame, this was as close to a sunny day as things got.

She walked down the streets of Ame together with her beloved, her arm looped around his. She sighed contentedly. He was such a sweetheart, she thought. He'd bought whatever caught her eye, even though the shopping trip was only a ruse to allow her to sense the differences in the chakra resonances of the paper angels Konan had stationed around Ame. He even carried the bags for her! When Sakura had tried to protest that it wasn't necessary – after all, she did not want him to think she was taking him for granted – he'd simply looked at her, and told her that he wanted to carry them. Even though his expression had been as empty as usual, she could still feel his care for her.

As she saw a tempura stall, Sakura's mouth watered. It had been far too long since she'd had her favourite dish – she recalled that she had just been about to take a bite of her tempura when she'd been attacked by Sasori and Deidara back in that little border town.

Itachi-sama caught her distraction, of course, and stopped. He always did. His attentiveness was just one of the things she loved about him. She smiled up at him. "Anata, can we? I'd love to share a meal together with you. I always eat alone..."

He paused, considering. Then he nodded. "Not here, though," he said. "We will buy whatever you wish to eat, and then we will have our food elsewhere, so you can continue to enjoy the fresh air." Her heart soared. Truly, she was blessed indeed to have caught the eye of this beautiful, perfect man.

He brought her to his favourite spot – the top of the tallest skyscraper in Ame, the place he liked to go whenever he felt morose. It was rash, he knew, seeking privacy for them in this way. It went against his resolve to keep her at arms' length. But when she had finished analysing the paper angels, she had been so full of triumph, and she'd

smiled at him in the way *his* Sakura did, and he was lost.

He could not share anything permanent with her. But he could indulge himself for this one day, he told himself. He could share his spot with her.

She looked around eagerly, seeing the skyline of the war-torn village. "It seems really weird to say this," she said, "but it's beautiful, in a tragic way. All those burned and gutted buildings... It makes me feel like I'm not alone in all I've lost. And then I see the people moving around, the patches of construction, and it gives me hope, somehow. As if to tell me that life goes on, you know?"

He nodded, glad that she'd found a new nuance to a place that was special to him. To him, this spot had just spoken of freedom. Looking at the endless landscape of skies made him feel unshackled from his terrible destiny, if only for a while; its position above all the other buildings made him feel like he had risen above his troubles.

She sat next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder as she happily munched on her food, and Itachi felt a deep sense of contentment. In that moment, he could almost pretend he was back in Konoha, and the past ten years had never happened. He was just a regular 24-year-old shinobi. He'd retired from ANBU, and become a jounin-sensei, and his life's work was to teach instead of kill. He could pretend that he'd brought his sweetheart up to the Hokage monument for a date.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, and he turned to the woman snuggled up to him.

"How much of your life do you remember?" he asked. He was actually more curious about the details of how the persona-switching worked, and how much of their experiences the personas shared. Sakura seemed to have retained her memories from meeting the Akatsuki, and Brainwashed Sakura – they really needed to find a better name to call her – was fully aware of their purpose in visiting the market stalls. He didn't want to directly ask her if she was aware of the original Sakura, in case it broke her mind in some way, but he did want to investigate further. Sitting up here with her, dreaming of the life he might have had... it was making him want to find out how much of his Sakura was real.

"All of it," she said, smiling. "Is there anything you wanted to ask me about?"

He realized then that this Sakura would probably answer anything he

asked due to her eagerness to please him. He could not abuse his power over her by asking her personal questions that his Sakura would not have answered. He settled for a more neutral question.

“What made you start studying seals?” There. He did not think Sakura would have bothered to imbue her with the fine details of her studies, given that this was not Brainwashed Sakura’s purpose. By warming her up to the topic, he could get an idea of how much of his Sakura’s knowledge she possessed. If she did possess Sakura’s in-depth knowledge, it could confirm that all memories were shared between the personas.

Her gaze grew distant. “My father died a year ago,” she said quietly. Itachi immediately felt like a cad. In spite of his best efforts, he’d managed to go straight for the most personal topic. “It was a genetic disease. It affected his brain, made him act erratic. He was in so much pain too. We knew how to heal the damage, of course, but our medical techniques weren’t yet advanced enough to correct the mutation. But each time we healed up the damage, it extended his life by a few months. So shishou and I planned to just keep on buying time by healing him while figuring out a more permanent solution.”

She sighed, and Itachi noticed that tears were welling up in her eyes. “You don’t have to continue talking about it if it’s painful,” he said gently. “I didn’t realize that it would be a personal question. I apologize.”

She smiled, but he noticed that her lips were wobbling in the effort to keep it there. “No, I want to talk about it. The more I do, the easier it gets to deal with the grief.”

“Whatever makes you most comfortable,” he replied, setting aside his own discomfort. He was upset that he’d inadvertently pried into what must be a difficult part of her life, but if she felt it helped, who was he to deny her?

She nodded, and resumed her story. “We eventually realized that there was no way we could correct a genetic mutation using our traditional techniques. Medical ninjutsu requires a high level of chakra control to begin with, and to go all the way down to a molecular level, to something we can’t even see under a microscope... it’s not something that was possible for me or shishou. That’s when we started exploring seals. Because well, when humans channel chakra, there’s bound to be imperfections, and leakages. But seals are the very language of chakra. So even though they may degrade over time, if

you manage to discover the right one, they can compensate for a person's difficulty with chakra control."

She sighed heavily. "But well, my father didn't want to continue trying. He was tired of the pain, he said. He was tired of going through the same cycle of healing and degradation. So that last time... well. He didn't survive it. I swore I would do everything I could to ensure nobody had to suffer a loss like that again. And the more I learned about seals, the more I realized its potential. And well, you can't really study seals without taking a deep dive into chakra theory, so... here I am. And even though I *know* my work has saved the lives of shinobi in the field many times over, I still haven't found the original answer I was searching for, that would have saved my father. And I will continue searching until I find it."

She met his eyes, and Itachi again saw the woman he had grown to love in spite of himself – the fierce determination, even behind her pain. Even within Brainwashed Sakura. They behaved differently, and perceived things differently, to be sure. Yes, Brainwashed Sakura was more affectionate, more subservient, and more concerned with his opinion of her. Yes, she was more emotionally dependent on him. But at their core, all the personas were the same. They were blazing with the Will of Fire, the desire to give of themselves for the sake of those they loved.

And in that moment, he decided to let go of his doubts and fears. He would not allow them to prey on him anymore. To do so would be to steep himself in the selfishness that characterized the Curse of Hatred, thinking of how her actions affected him and him alone.

There was no way to be fully certain, of course. It was not as if he could devise a test for something he barely understood the mechanics of – and he suspected that even Sakura was not entirely sure how her persona-swapping worked. She probably operated more on instinct than anything else. And even so, he remembered her words from a few days back – one did not test the people they loved. They simply trusted. And so, he would do the same. He would base his decision on the actions he had seen from her thus far, rather than suspicions formed from the worst-case scenario.

He would trust this woman to have his back.

And at that moment, he swore that he could feel the sunshine warming him, even though the skies above Ame were as grey as ever.

To See Clearly

Itachi watched as Sakura returned back to being herself. She groaned and sank wearily onto the bed, fingers massaging her forehead.

“Is there anything at all that can be done to alleviate the pain?” he asked.

“Not particularly,” she grumbled. “It’s more psychological than anything else, honestly – combining and assimilating the memories is a *bitch*. Watching it happen from the back of my mind is so different from actually experiencing it for myself. And I’d rather not risk using chakra on it – it might make things worse.”

Wordlessly, Itachi knelt behind her and began kneading the muscles on her neck, feeling a thrill go through his body as Sakura let out a moan of relief. *He* was giving her comfort. And he could not deny the simple pleasure that came with bringing healing with his hands, rather than bloodshed.

He moved his hands to her scalp, gently pressing and rubbing. Sakura sighed softly in contentment, and Itachi thought he could go on in this way forever. Taking advantage of the moment, he leaned in a little closer to inhale her intoxicating herbal scent – it was brisk and energetic, like Sakura herself. Eventually, Sakura grasped his hands and lifted them off her head, and Itachi silently withdrew from her, regretting the end of their contact, even as he silently reminded himself not to push too far. There was indulging himself, and there was completely throwing his resolve aside.

“Thank you,” she sighed happily. “That was *amazing*. Honestly, if the whole missing-nin thing doesn’t work out, you could make a damn good masseuse.”

Itachi surprised himself by chuckling. The mischievous smirk that played about Sakura’s lips indicated that she was well aware of the sheer absurdity of her own statement.

“What were you up to with Tobi?” he asked, almost abruptly. As little as he wanted to divert them from their more casual conversation, he was burning with curiosity. Only Sakura’s obvious discomfort had held him back from immediately bombarding her with questions once she released the Brainwashed Sakura persona.

She flushed slightly. “I, uh, ran a diagnostic scan on him,” she admitted, seeming almost embarrassed. “I’m not really supposed to without patient consent, but uh, I just felt like any information could be useful.”

“When?” Itachi asked, startled. He hadn’t even sensed her chakra.

“When I hugged him. It was just a quick pulse of chakra, and I matched it to his chakra resonance first so it would be less obvious. I don’t think he noticed?”

Itachi wondered if she’d done the same to him. If she had, she would definitely have found out about his chest ailment. Was that how she’d guessed so accurately about his deteriorating eyesight as well?

“But why? What made you think you needed information on him?” he asked, setting aside the question of exactly how much Sakura knew about the status of his own health.

“His personality just seemed off. He acts so innocent and naïve. It didn’t seem likely to me that someone like that could have survived in Akatsuki for any length of time. And honestly, acting shallow to be underestimated is a tactic I use all the time too, so I figured that’s what he was doing. It wasn’t so weird during that first meeting, since I already knew that you’re all not one big happy family. But when he kept it up when we ran into him it just set off alarm bells. It’s not like he’d be overly concerned with keeping up appearances for *me*, since I’m a powerless prisoner and all, which means he wants you to underestimate him.”

“So you assessed that since he is not on my side, he is not an ally for you as well,” Itachi replied flatly. He was pleased, of course, at hearing her implied trust. Not to mention that her ability to look underneath the underneath was as impressive as always, even though some of her conclusions were incorrect – Tobi had already revealed his sinister nature to Itachi; the act *was* for Sakura’s benefit. Regardless, it was worrying. Would she inadvertently call further attention to herself from Tobi? Itachi realized then that he had to start trusting her with some secrets, if only for her own safety. She needed to know the risks of what she was investigating. What if Tobi decided her silence was worth more than her value as a hostage?

She shot him an amused look. “At this point, you’ve pretty much given me intel on all the Akatsuki, and you’ve also given explicit permission to me to pass information to Konoha. You’ve also sworn a blood oath

to protect my friends, and to never turn your Sharingan against a Konoha nin. Anyone who's not on your side is *definitely* someone I'd feel the need to keep tabs on."

He felt a pleasant warmth suffuse his chest. Part of his mind was still screaming for him to kill the attachment, that this was just more manipulation to tie him more closely to her. He ignored that voice. He stuck to his resolve, and chose to trust.

"Tobi is the one secretly controlling Akatsuki from the shadows, I am certain of it. He has previously declared himself to be Uchiha Madara," he told her. She was entirely too relaxed about this situation.

"Uchiha Madara – as in, one of the founders of Konoha, *that* Madara? And he's the *actual* leader? Not Pain?"

He nodded.

"No. It's impossible," she declared.

"I know it seems difficult to believe, but it is worth considering the possibility – it is unlikely that anyone would make such an audacious declaration without *any* backing whatsoever," Itachi replied. He had his own doubts, of course, but he could not dismiss the possibility that Tobi was indeed Madara, as he claimed. He needed her to understand the level of danger involved.

"Itachi, it's not about how believable it is. Konoha was founded eighty years ago – Madara must at least be a hundred years old at this point, even setting aside the fact that he was supposed to have been killed by the First Hokage. I am telling you that whoever Tobi is, there's no way he is older than fifty years of age, and that's a very conservative upper limit. He's actually likelier to be in his thirties. I know how to tell a body's age, and chakra doesn't lie. He's not Madara."

"Orochimaru was previously a part of Akatsuki, and he investigated a multitude of forbidden jutsu," Itachi pointed out. "There is always the possibility that Madara found a way to inhabit a younger ninja's body."

"No," Sakura insisted. She reached over to her pack and pulled her notebook out, and flipped through it feverishly. She stopped on a chart hidden within a doodle, showing it to him. "Look only at this line, okay? This line indicates the relationship between certain properties of chakra and age. It's nowhere near as precise as using

bodily clues to determine age, but it still gives some. And chakra signature is definitely something that transfers over – I met Orochimaru twice, years apart, and he was inhabiting a different body the second time. There was absolutely no change in his chakra signature. I can tell you for sure that whoever is inhabiting Tobi's body, he's nowhere near a hundred years old. There is *no way* that he is Madara, or possesses Madara's chakra."

Itachi sat back, frowning. He'd done his own investigating, of course. Tobi was undoubtedly an Uchiha – he had the ability to deactivate his Sharingan. He'd looked through genealogical records and the records of Uchiha graves. There were few Uchiha who'd died outside Konoha, and fewer still whose bodies were never recovered, and so could possibly be alive, although presumed dead. Madara had seemed like the most plausible candidate, especially considering Tobi's complete apathy toward Konoha. Most of the other candidates had been shinobi of unquestionable loyalties, unlikely to ever create and control a terrorist group.

Still... He could not deny that Sakura was probably right. She had actual evidence to back up her assertions, rather than likelihoods. And people could change. There had been a time, after all, when he would have denied with his last breath that his father could ever launch a coup against Konoha.

"What did you discover from running the diagnostic?" he finally asked. She might have learned something that might provide clues to Tobi's identity.

She sighed. "He has a Sharingan. That might be why he thought he could get away with claiming to be Madara. But that doesn't mean anything in itself – I mean, Kakashi-sensei is no Uchiha, and he has a Sharingan too. The right side of his face is completely crushed too, he doesn't have an eye on that side. Apart from that, he appears to be a completely healthy male in his thirties – on the surface level anyway. I didn't manage to check for anything deeper – I didn't want to risk him realizing what I was doing."

Itachi frowned. If his face was crushed... "Sakura-san, are you aware of how Kakashi-san gained his Sharingan? Or from who?" he asked slowly. She shook her head. He continued. "Towards the end of the Third Great Shinobi War, in one of the final skirmishes, one of the Uchiha perished. He was reportedly crushed by rocks, and he gave his Sharingan to his teammate right before his reported death. That teammate was Hatake Kakashi. I was only a young child at the time,

but I recall well the uproar it caused among the Uchiha, to have our doujutsu given away to an outsider.”

It had actually been one of the factors leading to the coup – the Uchiha became downright paranoid that their brethren would be sent out on hopeless missions, killed and have their Sharingan extracted to be transplanted onto ninja loyal to the Senju-influenced administration. Yes, the story of the mission of Kannabi Bridge was infamous among the Uchiha indeed.

Sakura drew in a sharp breath. “You don’t think... Kakashi-sensei’s old teammate?” she whispered, horrified. “He’s one of the ones Kakashi-sensei’s always visiting at the cenotaph. It would break his heart.”

Itachi nodded. “It seems like too much coincidence otherwise. Tobi has one Sharingan. One side of his face is crushed. You estimated that he should be in his thirties – that would also fit. He might well turn out to be Uchiha Obito.”

Silence reigned as they both looked at each other, considering the implications of what they had each learned.

It was Sakura that finally broke the silence. “Well,” she said. “I was kicking myself for being reckless but... I guess it was worth it to find out who the leader of Akatsuki really is, huh?”

He nodded. There was no disagreeing with that, even though he wished she would not put herself at risk, given how much danger she already was in by virtue of being who she was.

She smiled, and moved closer to him. “Thanks for the day out,” she said, slipping her arms around his shoulders in a hug. “And for the massage. They were both amazing, really.”

Even as he enjoyed the sensation of her pressing herself against his chest, he activated his Sharingan in an attempt to detect any flow of chakra from her. It was unlikely that she’d run her diagnostic on him after she’d told him how it worked, but nevertheless... Suddenly a thought occurred to him.

“Sakura-san,” he found himself saying, before he could talk himself out of it. “Would you be willing to teach me to perform the diagnostic you used on Tobi?”

She smiled at him radiantly, and Itachi was glad for his sudden impulse. “So I guess you’ve decided to switch from learning about

seals to learning medical ninjutsu, huh?" She laughed at his surprise.

"Don't worry, I'd be happy to teach you both," she said cheekily. "I noticed when you helped me with my experiment that you've got pretty good chakra control. With that and your Sharingan, I'm sure you could pick it up in no time."

He couldn't help himself. The thought of being able to do something good for once, to begin steps to heal instead of hurt... he allowed himself to smile, genuinely, for the first time in years. "Thank you, Sakura," he murmured, and poked her on the forehead.

Orochimaru licked his lips as he watched his next vessel move through the forms of the kata, smooth and sinuous like the snakes he favoured. It had been worth delaying taking over little Sasuke-kun's body, he decided. When Sasuke-kun had first demanded of Orochimaru that he wait until his revenge was fulfilled before taking his body for his own, Orochimaru had not been pleased. However, he had eventually conceded that it was worth the delay to allow Sasuke-kun to bloom further, and to possess a vessel that did not resist him when the time came. It could make things... difficult... if Sasuke-kun struggled against him.

And sure enough, Sasuke-kun had blossomed. He had even managed to awaken his Mangekyō after that rather dramatic incident a year prior. Orochimaru smiled at the memory. It was almost as if fate had conspired to create the circumstances that would allow him to gain a more powerful Sharingan.

Now, however, it was probably time he considered taking Sasuke-kun's body after all. His next body switch was due soon, and he found himself reluctant to allow Sasuke-kun to face Itachi. After all, Orochimaru had barely made it out of his confrontation with Itachi alive. While Sasuke-kun had indeed grown by leaps and bounds, he was still nowhere near where he needed to be in order to defeat his older brother. Orochimaru had hoped he would get there after awakening his Mangekyō, but it was becoming more and more apparent that Sasuke-kun had hit a plateau. He would not experience much more growth. He would never be where he needed to be to defeat Itachi. In any confrontation, Itachi would have to be trying to lose in order for Sasuke-kun to emerge the victor, and Orochimaru had not invested so much time and effort into the boy to let his body be destroyed by a hopeless battle for a pointless reason.

“Orochimaru-sama,” Kabuto said, stepping up next to him, not bothering with useless gestures like kneeling. Orochimaru turned to his most loyal servant, who had just returned from a meeting with Sasori. Kabuto was a highly valuable resource indeed. Not only was he entirely devoted to Orochimaru, and a highly skilled medic-nin, he also provided useful intelligence on Akatsuki. Sasori believed Kabuto to be a puppet completely under his control, and so, had never bothered even trying to hide why he was asking what he did. And so, over the course of providing Sasori with false information that would not hurt Orochimaru’s aims one bit, Kabuto managed to extract quite useful information indeed.

“Report,” Orochimaru replied.

“He wanted to know what the likelihood was of Akatsuki being able to snatch up Sasuke. From what I gathered, they’re trying to bait Naruto with his two best friends. From what he implied, it seems like they already have their third teammate.”

“The girl,” Orochimaru breathed. “Haruno Sakura.” This could prove to either play directly into Orochimaru’s plans, or throw a wrench in them, depending on how the news was pitched to Sasuke-kun. After all, the girl had been the reason behind Sasuke-kun’s awakening the Mangekyō. Yes, this certainly bore thinking about.

For the first time, Sakura woke the next morning before Itachi did. She took advantage of the opportunity to study him. His back was to her, as expected. What surprised her was the way he seemed to huddle into himself, almost as if he was trying to compress himself, to take up as little space as possible. She frowned. It seemed so at odds with the way he usually carried himself, with quiet confidence in his ability and status.

Being a woman who was alive and had functioning eyes, she could not help but gaze appreciatively at the hint of his arm muscles that was exposed under his short-sleeved shirt. It was a pity they would begin travelling that day – she supposed he would begin wearing the Akatsuki cloak the entire time they were out of the base, and she would no longer be able to ogle how his muscles rippled under his shirt as he moved.

Maybe she would get lucky, and he would grace her with a smile again. It would make up for being unable to appreciate the aesthetic of his lean body, she mused. The smile had taken years off him,

stripping away some of lines of stress that were perpetually present. She hadn't realized just how much he carried on himself until she'd seen him release it just a little the night before. He'd been so excited to learn just a little of her medical ninjutsu, even though he'd tried to hide it. And as she'd expected, he was stupidly talented and picked it up really quickly.

She smiled, reflecting on her memories of the day prior. Between the conclusions she'd drawn from the reports of the Uchiha massacre, and his behaviour... She no longer had any doubts. Itachi *was* a good man, and there was more to the massacre than had seemed. The realization about the massacre in itself had already allowed her to relax around him, to be more playful than she would have dared. It no longer felt like a betrayal of who she was to admire just how attractive Itachi was, and to enjoy his company.

And then, out on their date, he'd proved that he truly deserved her trust. After his question to Brainwashed Sakura, he must have realized that the lovesick girl would answer anything he asked. She still winced at how willing she'd been to disclose one of her most personal memories to him. And yet, he'd displayed regret at asking, going so far as to assure her that she need not finish answering. He also hadn't taken the opportunity to pry. He could have asked her anything. About his files that she'd been scrambling to hide from him, about Konoha's military secrets, or even about Naruto's location. Sakura shuddered at the thought of how careless she'd been in crafting Brainwashed Sakura's persona. In making her so eager to please Itachi, she'd risked all the secrets she had worried so much about hiding.

And he hadn't taken advantage of it.

She knew then with a deep certainty that he had to be Konoha's spy. He'd said that his goals did not require Naruto or Sasuke to be harmed. He'd sworn so easily to never turn his Sharingan against a Konoha nin. But more than that, his actions spoke for themselves. He'd been incredibly blasé about leaking Akatsuki's secrets to her. He'd even openly discussed his suspicions of Tobi with her.

She suddenly yelped in dismay. Tobi's true role, and their suspicions of his identity, was intel that absolutely needed to get to Konoha. But considering that they were due to leave in a few hours, there was no way Itachi was going to leave her alone again. She sighed. It was time to come clean to him that she already had an open channel of communication with Konoha. She hoped he was not upset by the fact

that she'd kept it from him – he'd seemed to be genuinely angered by the idea that she would have secrets from him, as necessary as it had been.

She reluctantly pulled her eyes away from Itachi's form, and padded over to the desk to begin drafting her report to her shishou.

Itachi had slept more deeply than he had in years. He was shocked when he woke to find that not only had Sakura gotten up before he did, he had not even stirred when she had moved. He growled to himself. It was rather pleasant to not have been tormented by his demons throughout the night, and even more pleasant to wake up feeling rested, for once. But he still needed those instincts. He was getting too comfortable with Sakura, and it was making him sloppy.

As he stepped out of the washroom after freshening up, he found Sakura fidgeting nervously.

"I need to tell you something," she said, and Itachi's mind immediately went into overdrive. Was she ill? Did she regret teaching him how to perform the diagnostic? Or had she been lying the night before when she'd praised how quickly he learned?

"Yes?" he asked impassively, betraying none of his anxiety.

"I... uh... Remember how when we made our deal, you told me it was okay for me to communicate with Konoha?" Itachi felt absurdly relieved that whatever it was had nothing to do with his skill at applying the diagnostic technique.

"Yes?" he urged.

"Yeah uh... I kind of already have been keeping in regular contact with Tsunade-shishou," she blurted out, her eyes fixed on her tightly clasped hands.

There was a pause.

"Oh," Itachi said. Was there more? This alone could not have made her as nervous as she appeared to be. She acted as if she was expecting him to slam doors or throw a fireball at her.

She peeked up at him from under her eyelashes. "You're not mad?" she asked tentatively.

“It would be rather unreasonable of me to be upset about something I’d outright said you could do, wouldn’t it?” he asked. “The only stipulation I made was that you be discreet. Surely, you do not think I would find fault with you for keeping to that condition.”

He wondered what it was about his behaviour that would have given her that impression, and belatedly understood that she must have been more affected by the bitterness and resentment he’d displayed over the past days than he had realized. He sighed internally. Would he never stop upsetting or frightening her?

Her posture relaxed, and she looked at him expectantly. Itachi wondered what else was going on, and what he was missing. He did not usually feel this slow to catch on to what she was implying. Something had changed between them, he realized. Something had changed, and he could no longer predict what she was thinking, and it irked him.

“You’re not going to ask me what I told them?” she asked. Ah. That was what she was concerned about.

“Surely you do not think I would need to ask such a question of a kunoichi of your calibre?” he scoffed, and felt delight as she flushed slightly at the compliment. “I assume you would have communicated everything that you’ve observed, and every bit of information I’ve given you.”

He worried, of course. He’d been so careless already, and had let down his guard so much around her. He could only hope that Tsunade would assess any wavering in Sakura’s opinion towards him as being the product of her trying to find anything to hold onto in a hopeless situation, even though the thought of anyone downplaying Sakura’s judgement in that way made a surge of indignation go through him. His sentiments sometimes bewildered him as much as Sakura did.

“The only thing I did wonder about was how you managed it,” he said, “but I thought it only right not to ask, given that I too would hesitate to share such intelligence with someone belonging to an enemy faction.”

“Well, you’re going to see it now anyway,” she mumbled. “It’s part of why I decided to come clean. I wanted to send a report before we set out, and there really wasn’t any way to hide it from you.”

He nodded, waiting. After she performed the summoning jutsu, however, he felt a surge of rage. “You have a summons? And a

summons native to one of the three sage regions, no less! Why haven't you used the reverse summoning jutsu to escape already?" he demanded. Did she really value her life so little that whatever intelligence she could glean was weighed less than her own safety, when it was within reach? It angered him, especially since her safety came second only to his plans for Sasuke on his list of priorities.

She smiled sadly. "I can't," she replied. "I just don't have the ability to mould senjutsu chakra, and trust me, I've tried. Shikkotsu Forest isn't like Mount Myōboku – it's an environment of acid, and it would be fatal for anyone who isn't a sage to travel there."

The slug trilled in agreement. "It's true, Shinobi-san," she said. "Shikkotsu Forest is not welcoming to outsiders, and becoming a slug sage is the hardest among the three."

He nodded in understanding, and rubbed at his brow. "Nevertheless," he sighed. "You need to inform Tsunade-san that you will not be able to report in for a while. Konan is extremely familiar with the chakra signature of the summoning jutsu, given how frequently I use my crow summons. If she detects it being used and is not contacted by a crow soon after, it will draw more suspicion that we cannot afford in this situation." Sakura agreed, and made the recommended addition to her note.

He hesitated. Sakura did not know the full extent of Akatsuki's plan, and he had not been able to communicate it in his coded letters to Jiraiya. Those only accommodated short messages. "How much detail have you gone into about what we're actually going to be doing on this mission?" he asked. It was at odds with what he'd said earlier about how he didn't need to know, but hopefully she would not think too much about the contradiction. It was too much to hope that she would not notice it.

"I told them that we're going to some of the major towns around Kumo, and that the plan was for me to be shown out and about, openly under Akatsuki's control," she replied. "I didn't say anything about Brainwashed Sakura, though... Do you think I should?"

"It could only help," he replied noncommittally, hiding how imperative it was that she include that she would appear to be consorting with members of Akatsuki under her own free will. He was already crossing many of his self-imposed lines, and what with that slug watching... Tsunade would undoubtedly begin to suspect about his true loyalties. It could not be helped, but he could at least mitigate

the extent of it.

He sighed in relief as she added about her crafted persona as well. That would be enough. Tsunade would be able to immediately understand the implications of a Konoha kunoichi being seen willingly keeping company with Akatsuki. She could use Sakura's report to prepare Konoha's allies, which would prevent the assuredly unstable alliance from being sabotaged by suspicion of double-dealing on Konoha's part.

After the slug had been dismissed, he turned back to Sakura. Meeting the slug had made him realize that he had missed something very important in all their preparations for the upcoming trip. He had once again made the assumption that he knew everything about Sakura's abilities and limitations, when he could not be further from the truth. "Sakura-san," he said, noting how her face seemed to fall a little on hearing the honorific. He recalled that he'd omitted it the previous night, and winced internally again. He was indeed getting far too sloppy. "Do you anticipate needing any form of support over the next few days? If you do, say it now. I would rather save the communication methods we have discussed for the specific situations that require it."

She hesitated. Itachi rushed to reassure her. "Do not hold back, Sakura-san," he said in his gentlest tone. "If there is anything at all that could help you with your tasks, I will do my best to fulfil it."

She sighed. "It's just... I feel ungrateful for asking, you know? You're doing so much for me already."

He raised an eyebrow. "And you are not returning the favour? Let me remind you that I stabbed you in the chest, and took it without flinching. And you have not expressed a single ounce of resentment or suspicion as a result." *Unlike me. I have doubted and questioned you at every turn.* "You put yourself at great risk to help me attain my goals. I would be honoured to repay even a fraction of the sacrifices you have already made."

Her eyes softened, and her shoulders relaxed as the hesitation left her. "Well, since you're asking so nicely," she said, smiling impishly. "If it's not too much trouble, once in a while, do you think I could get a break from being Brainwashed Sakura? When she takes over, I'm still aware. I'm there in the back of my head, watching what's going on. And it hurts," she admitted. "You say I'm a capable kunoichi, but I haven't always been that way. Watching myself be Brainwashed

Sakura takes me back to when I was a useless genin who just waited around for my teammates to save me.”

He knew, of course. He’d always kept extremely close tabs on Sasuke as his brother grew up, and so was very familiar with his teammates and sensei as well. It was why he’d initially been so surprised at just how much Sakura had blossomed in the years since Sasuke had left Konoha, and he’d stopped observing her.

“I can put up protections similar to the ones I have here,” he said, gesturing around the room. “Though that will only be possible the nights that we’ll be staying in an inn. When we stay outdoors, the most I can do for you is to cast a genjutsu on you. It won’t be much, but at least you’ll get a chance to talk to someone, walk around as yourself, if only in an illusory world. That’ll also give me the chance to teach you about genjutsu, as I promised.”

“Speaking of promises,” she replied. “We haven’t actually started doing any work on your eyes. You’ll need them for the upcoming mission. I can’t really do any major work with the time we have now, but I can at least clear some of the chakra build-up and soothe some of the inflammation. That’s something I used to do quite regularly for Kakashi-sensei.”

He could not deny that he was tempted. Any amount of sight she could restore would allow him to see her that much more clearly. She was so expressive, and it was always a joy to behold, yet difficult without having to activate his Sharingan. But he knew it was a slippery slope. If he accepted this bit of healing, what would stop him from allowing her to completely restore his sight? From there, what would stop him from asking her to heal his chest ailment as well? He had not taken the trouble he had to hide these things from her to throw it all away just to satisfy his desire to watch her.

Kill the attachment. She is not for you. Remember Sasuke.

He had to allow his physical state to deteriorate as much as possible before Sasuke faced him. He loved his brother, he truly did, but Sasuke would never have been able to reach his level even before Itachi had left Konoha. And after ten years living among enemies, being constantly on his guard, that gap would only have widened. Granted, Sasuke had spent five years with Orochimaru, but he doubted that Sasuke lived in as much paranoia and fear as he did. After all, being with Orochimaru did grant him a measure of protection which Itachi did not enjoy.

And so, remembering Sasuke's need to defeat him realistically, Itachi spoke the words that sealed his fate. To never be able to behold her radiance as completely as he desired.

"Don't waste your chakra. We might need it for healing other more urgent injuries, if we run into enemies along the way. My eyes can wait."

Sense and Sensibility

Chapter Notes

WARNING for a situation with dubious consent, and also self-shaming afterward. It's sort of resolved by the end of the chapter, but read with caution anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’re sure,” Tsunade said. Even though she had phrased it as a question, it really wasn’t one – she knew that Katsuyu’s conclusions tended to be right more often than not. After all, the slug’s entire being was dedicated to reading and understanding the human body.

“Yes, Tsunade” Katsuyu trilled patiently. “His heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration were all elevated, and his body temperature increased slightly as well. I was not physically attached to him, so I could not get more detailed information on his adrenaline and cortisol levels. However, I did get quite clear readings on what I could detect from a distance. I do believe he was genuinely angered at the thought that Sakura had not taken an opportunity to escape.”

Tsunade exhaled deeply, thanked Katsuyu and dismissed her. She turned to Jiraiya, who for once appeared solemn, rather than his usual jovial self. “So, we were right,” she sighed. “Uchiha Itachi is, somehow, on our side. Either that, or he’s a good enough actor to fool both Katsuyu *and* Sakura, and has the ability to plan so far ahead that we can’t interpret his actions at all.”

It should be good news, she knew. And she was relieved that against all odds, Sakura had somehow managed to find a place of safety within the bowels of hell that was probably the Akatsuki headquarters. But the revelation brought with it pain as well. What the hell had driven a man, who at this point had practically nothing to gain from his continued loyalty to the village, to massacre his entire clan?

“He probably is, and does,” Jiraiya acknowledged. “Nobody even suspected there to be more to the story. I’m the one who has been corresponding with the man, and even I had nothing more than a shadow of a suspicion.” He hesitated, then went on. “Any luck coming up with a plan for dealing with the council yet?”

“Apart from beating them all bloody? No,” Tsunade grumbled. “I wish I hadn’t thrown out all the sake – at least I’d have an excuse to throw the empty bottle at one of them. In any case, my priority is to ensure Sakura’s safety. Uchiha *may* be trustworthy as far as her immediate safety is concerned, but he’s still a wildcard. Sakura reported that he admitted that his goals differed from Akatsuki’s, but we don’t really have much of an idea what they actually *are*. And that’s not even including this entire business with Uchiha Obito supposedly being alive, and working against Konoha to boot.”

Jiraiya glanced through the latest missive from Sakura once again. “Let’s focus on the problems we can solve first,” he muttered. “Kumo, huh? Guess we should count ourselves lucky. I’d rather deal with the Raikage than with the Tsuchikage.”

“Suna or Kiri would have been better, but I know better than to hope for that,” Tsunade grouched. Gaara had been a large favourite to assume the mantle of the fifth Kazekage, but he had eventually conceded that he could better ensure his village’s safety by going into hiding with Naruto. His sister Temari had taken the job instead, and Tsunade had to admit that it was extremely enjoyable to work with someone else who didn’t tolerate bullshit. Together with Terumi Mei, the female Kage finally outnumbered the male ones, and each Kage summit actually managed to accomplish something in the way of building inter-village alliances and keeping the jinchuriki safely ensconced, out of the Akatsuki’s reach. It was still a battle each time dealing with the Raikage and the Tsuchikage, though. A might be slightly more tolerable than Ōnoki, but both were incredibly stubborn and set in their ways. Enlisting A’s aid, and without the council finding out, would be a difficult task indeed.

She rubbed her arms, feeling the ever-present *itch* to get something, anything, alcoholic into her bloodstream. She forced herself to focus on the task at hand. Her hands were still tied – she had not managed to get the executive order stopping her from sending out a team to retrieve Sakura revoked, even though Sakura’s communications gave them enough intelligence on the Akatsuki and their base to justify such a mission. Tsunade had to admit she was impressed by her apprentice’s ability to take advantage of a bad situation – she’d even managed to leave the base, and had memorized the route in and out. She’d included a rough sketch of the route as part of her latest report.

Tsunade needed to take a leaf from her apprentice’s book. The risks Sakura had taken had been unorthodox ones that certainly would never have been sanctioned in any official setting. But amazingly,

they'd *worked*. She'd trusted Uchiha Itachi, and it had paid off. Tsunade, too, needed to trust in her people. She couldn't just consider the obvious options, like sending out an unofficial rescue squad. She had to be bold.

"Get me Naruto," she ordered Jiraiya.

His jaw dropped. "Is that wise?"

She snorted. "It definitely isn't. It could backfire in so many ways. But Naruto's bond to Killer B is our best bet in getting A to get off his ass and actually do something to help."

As Konan ran, keeping to the agreed distance, she knew she'd made a terrible miscalculation.

She had *never* left Nagato's side since that awful day when Hanzo had double-crossed them, and Yahiko had died as a result. She had vowed to protect the last precious person she had left, and she'd kept to that promise throughout the years.

And now, she had allowed herself to get so fixated on Uchiha Itachi and whatever plans he was hatching with the kunoichi that she'd left Nagato behind with Madara. She'd practically wrapped her heart's brother up in a bow for Madara.

She could continue keeping an eye on Nagato for the rest of the day, but that was all she could do. By the next day, they would be out of the range of her jutsu, and she couldn't do a single thing if Madara decided to make a move.

And yet, even as she fretted, she couldn't deny that had she chosen to stay behind, she would have spent the entire time worrying about just what Itachi and the girl were getting up to. There were no good choices in this situation. There was only one of her, and nobody else she could trust to side with Nagato. Power-hungry bastards, the lot of them were. They would not interfere in any confrontation and would simply side with whomever emerged the victor.

Nagato was more than capable of defending himself against an outright attack, she knew. But what about a kunai in the back? Poison in his drink? She could only stay committed to her current course, and hope that whatever plans Madara had in mind would not materialize just yet. She resolved yet again to break the girl's attachment to Itachi, and sway her over to her own side.

Sakura was almost glad that Brainwashed Sakura was in control at the moment. While she sorely wished she could experience the feeling of freedom for the first time in almost two weeks first-hand, she had a lot of thinking to do. She would have the memories of the wind whipping through her hair and raindrops falling on her face soon enough.

Itachi's reluctance to have her even scan him with her chakra, let alone perform a healing on him. His complete and utter lack of dismay that she was communicating all the information he'd given her – hell, he'd outright admitted that he'd been expecting it. And his anger at her supposed refusal to take a chance of escape. And she knew for certain that his anger was genuine – faking emotions he did not feel was just not Itachi's style. After observing him for days on end, she'd learned to differentiate between his normal calm and his forced indifference. The latter appeared to emerge when he cared about something, but did not want to reveal it, and still managed to retain sufficient control over his expressions.

Then, she'd given him a little test. She'd left the judgement about whether to inform her shishou about the persona she'd be wearing up to him. And his words had been: "It could not hurt." Delivered in a disinterested manner, almost sounding *bored*, entirely at odds with the tightness at the corner of his eyes. If she hadn't spend so long observing him and his mannerisms, she would have missed it. First, he asked her what information she was including, and then, acted as if he could not care less about the contents, when his tenseness indicated that he cared very much indeed.

That had clinched it for her. He *was* the spy. She'd already been mostly certain, of course, but having more evidence in favour of it couldn't hurt. She'd included that little titbit in her report as well, when he'd assumed she was writing about Brainwashed Sakura.

But even if he was the spy, why was he so averse to having his eyes healed? Why would he knowingly weaken himself? She knew that stuff about conserving her chakra was a load of bullshit – after all, if he had accepted her healing, he'd be better equipped to ensure that her healing was not even needed if they did run into enemies.

She wished, again, that it had occurred to her to use her diagnostic on him *before* she'd told him about how it worked. She'd noticed him tensing up each time she initiated physical contact after that. He'd be watching for it. She wondered again what was it in his body that he felt he needed to hide. Maybe it was some kind of emergency weapon

or jutsu? Did he truly think her capable of disarming his defenses?

She would have to simply continue watching. It was a pity that she'd already figured out that the usual tools in a kunoichi's bag of tricks for information extraction wouldn't work on him. It would have been nice to have an excuse to stroke the hard planes of his chest herself, instead of experiencing it second-hand through Brainwashed Sakura's memories. Or running her hands through his hair, and feeling if it was as silky and soft as it looked. Or experiencing the touch of his talented hands again, discovering what other reactions they would be able to coax out of her –

Focus! she snarled to herself, administering a mental smack for good measure. She'd clearly gone far too long without giving herself some tender loving care, and she was stuck in close proximity to a man who looked and behaved like her first love, with the exception that he actually gave a shit about her. And she had to keep thinking about him in order to puzzle out his motivations and his secrets. And she had an entire corner of her mind dedicated to acting like she was completely besotted with him. It was entirely natural that she was getting a little... fixated.

First chance she got for a little privacy, she was going to try to give herself a little relief. Then, she'd be able to get her head screwed back on straight and figure out the enigma that was Uchiha Itachi.

Itachi found himself appreciating just how well he and Sakura worked together. When they'd stopped for the night at a clearing that looked passable, they had not needed to speak to decide on their respective duties. He'd kept silent and set about securing a perimeter, curious to see how she would react to not being given any instruction. Once she'd realized what task he was working on, she had begun preparing their campsite. When he'd returned from setting his usual subtle traps, she'd already set out their bedrolls, and she'd placed a decently-sized pile of twigs in the centre of the campsite.

He was, frankly, surprised. They'd butted heads so much that he'd almost expected that dynamic to continue in every aspect of their interaction, even with her assuming the Brainwashed persona. Although, now that he thought back on it, he and Sakura tended to disagree more when preparing for something. When it came down to action, they were able to adapt to each other rather well. And even as Brainwashed Sakura, she still retained her brisk efficiency. *Lovesick girls can make excellent shinobi too*, he reminded himself.

“I wasn’t sure if it was safe to start a fire,” Sakura explained. “I figured you would be more familiar with the risks in this area, and that it would be better to wait for you.”

He nodded approvingly, and used his fireball jutsu to get the fire started. “Ame tends to be rather isolated,” he explained. “So there isn’t much risk of running into shinobi from other nations this close to the border. Konan will probably also keep up her own perimeter – based on what I’ve observed, her paper jutsus have a range of at least five kilometres. Of course, that doesn’t mean we can be entirely relaxed – that’s why I’ve still set out traps. But it should be safe enough for a fire, and just for tonight, safe enough that we won’t need to take watches.”

With Sakura reassured, they set about preparing dinner. Again, they fell into a peaceful and companionable silence, sharing their tasks with ease. It was all rather nice, and Itachi felt a pang in his heart for what he might have had in another life.

Eventually, they finished their food, and Itachi sat down cross-legged on a patch of grass. He looked to Sakura. “Come,” he said, and left it at that. They had not searched for Konan’s spying devices – they had both agreed that it would be far too suspicious if they found and disabled them every night. It would be practically screaming that they had something to hide. They would keep Sakura’s ability to differentiate between the jutsus in reserve, for the times when they truly needed the secrecy.

She again made her way to his lap, seating herself on his left thigh. He almost told her it wasn’t necessary for her to be so close – it would work just as well with her sitting next to him. All he needed was some level of proximity. And then, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and lifted her face to his, and he saw her look of perfect contentment. He shoved aside all sense, which insisted that he needed distance. Just for tonight, he told himself. Just for tonight, he could allow himself to enjoy the closeness of her embrace.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her closer, and activated a genjutsu that would not require the Sharingan. He had made an oath to never turn his Sharingan against a Konoha-nin, after all, and that included her. And in any case, it was unnecessary. She knew not to fight his entry into her mind.

Sure enough, the genjutsu activated with little trouble. He and Sakura were sitting in the same position. She shifted slightly, and began

kissing his neck, and he immediately released the arm around her waist. This was still Brainwashed Sakura. Where was his Sakura?

As he glanced around, another Sakura appeared before him. This was the one he'd met on his last journey into her mind – the one who was coloured in black, white, and shades of grey, who Sakura referred to as Inner Sakura. She smirked, and planted herself onto his other thigh.

“It’s so good to see you, Itachi,” she purred. She pried one of Brainwashed Sakura’s arms from around him, and snapped at her. “Oi, budge up! You get him outside too, so now you’d better share.” Brainwashed Sakura made a whine of protest, but dropped her arm and returned her concentration to kissing his neck.

Just as Itachi thought he could gain enough control to extricate himself from the dual assault, Inner Sakura placed a hand on his chest, and slowly trailed it down. His breath caught as her hand slipped down the waistband of his pants.

And then, she was *stroking him* and he was so, painfully, hard, and her teeth were tugging on his earlobe, and Brainwashed Sakura was all the while sucking on his neck, and Itachi was groaning in pure bliss. All thoughts of removing himself from them fled, and almost unconsciously, he was caressing the back of Inner Sakura’s neck, and his arm found its way back around Brainwashed Sakura’s waist, and then there was only Itachi, Inner Sakura, Brainwashed Sakura, and intense passion.

And then, a voice cut through the haze of pleasure that had taken over Itachi’s mind.

“Both of you, get the fuck off him NOW!” Sakura screamed, and he returned to himself. Horrified, he dropped his arms immediately, but neither Sakura moved.

“If you’re not going to tap this hot piece of ass, I am,” Inner Sakura sneered. His Sakura simply fixed her with a glare. Inner Sakura laughed, and planted a kiss on Itachi’s lips. “Until next time, loverboy,” she murmured, and sashayed away.

Which left him with Brainwashed Sakura still on him, and Sakura’s gaze fixed on them both. He felt almost paralyzed under the anger he could feel rolling off her, and dropped his head in shame. How had he allowed himself to give in to his forbidden desires so easily? It was *his* genjutsu, and *he* should have maintained control. And instead he... he...

He could not even bring himself to think it. *She loves Sasuke*, that voice in the back of his head whispered cruelly. *He has been gone from her life for years, but she still loves him. Any affection she shows to you is purely for survival's sake, and you took advantage of that. Your weakness has cost you any respect she ever had for you, and you have hurt her.*

"I love him, and he loves me," Brainwashed Sakura said fiercely. "What right do you have to interfere in whatever we do together?" She clutched at him even more tightly, and Itachi felt his shame compound. She had been crafted to be subservient to him, and he'd used her affection for him. He was a base, vile, creature.

"He's here to see *me*!" Sakura yelled back. "Get off him, now!"

"No," Brainwashed Sakura replied, steel in her voice. Itachi almost felt an inappropriate laugh bubble up from within him, entirely at odds with the utter disgust he felt towards himself roiling through him. Had he ever thought she was weak? It turned out she could be fierce enough, strong enough, when it came to him.

He pulled his mass of emotions back into himself, visualizing himself feeding them into flame. He was a tool, and it was about time he fulfilled his purpose, rather than sitting around dumbly.

"We will spend time together later," Itachi promised, tilting Brainwashed Sakura's face up towards him. That was true enough. They would have no choice but to spend time together, for as long as this journey continued. "But she is right that I am here to see her. We have work that needs to be done."

"Anata, let me stay," she begged.

"Honestly, stop being so clingy! He doesn't even like you that much. I'm his favourite, he said so! You're embarrassing us both," Sakura snarled. Brainwashed Sakura's face paled, and she looked to him. Itachi met her gaze, and then immediately dropped it. The sheer pain within them was just too much for him to bear.

"Why?" she asked, her voice cracking. "I – I only ever wanted to please you. Tell me how I can do better," she begged, and Itachi's heart broke all over again.

"It's not your fault," he said quietly, trying to ease her pain as much as he could. The entire situation was ridiculous, in a way. She was a creation of Sakura's mind, a temporary existence. Her feelings shouldn't matter.

And yet, somehow, they did.

Her pain was real, and so, she deserved comfort.

“Your feelings for me are a result of my hurting you,” he went on. He had not actually done anything, of course. But that did not mean her experiences were any less real to her. She deserved some form of closure, at least. “It is not something we can undo, as much as I wish we could. I will forever carry the burden of your pain with me.” It was as close to the truth as he could make it, in any case. He *did* feel tremendous guilt that he had not found another way to rescue Sakura, and that he had possibly dragged her into even greater danger by enlisting her aid. He still shuddered to think of what a close call they had experienced when he’d been forced to stab her. If she’d trusted him any less, if she had flinched... she might not be here with him.

She nodded silently, stood, and walked away, her arms wrapped around herself. Sakura watched her go with a look of compassion, entirely at odds with the anger she’d earlier displayed. Sighing, she sank down next to Itachi. He summoned up his courage so that he could face her, and make amends. Somehow.

“Are you alright?” she asked him. “I am so sorry I didn’t get here earlier. I’m not used to being the dormant persona when I’m pulled into a genjutsu. It took me a while to get my bearings.”

His head jerked upwards. He was stunned. “Why would you apologize?” he asked incredulously. “It was not your fault. It was my genjutsu. I should have retained control. Instead I used you, and I used your personas’ desire for me.”

She laughed. “Itachi, you could have been the Rikudou Sennin himself, and you still wouldn’t have been able to stop them,” she said drily. “There’s a *reason* Inner Sakura guards my mind. She’s incredibly tenacious and fierce, especially when she wants something.”

He smiled wanly. “Such as a ‘hot piece of ass’?”

Sakura flushed. “Am I supposed to deny that you’re stupidly attractive? Way more than you have any right to be?”

This feeling, of being tongue-tied, was entirely foreign to him. He wanted to say something witty, make her laugh again, and yet, he was still processing the fact that she’d called him *attractive*. He’d known, at the back of his head, that he was blessed with good looks. But he’d never really thought much about it, until now, when the woman he

loved said she found his looks pleasing. It was almost enough to make hope swell within him, until he remembered his similarity in appearance to his younger brother, and he came crashing back down to earth.

“In any case,” Sakura went on. “I’m glad you actually seemed to be enjoying it. Because well, if you hadn’t, it would mean that they’d forced their attentions on you, and I didn’t manage to protect you from it. And that’s not in any way okay for anyone. But especially not you. Not after you’ve done so much to protect me from exactly that kind of treatment.”

He nodded, understanding her reasoning. Somehow, he’d gotten far luckier than he had any right to. He had not lost her regard or her respect. He didn’t quite accept her view of the matter, though. He might not have been able to push them off, but it was still unacceptable that he’d allowed himself to succumb to his desires so much. He was not just a man falling in love, as much as he wished he could be. He was steadily walking toward his own death, and now, when all his plans were reaching their culmination, was not the time to allow himself to be distracted.

Remember the slippery slope. You cannot give yourself even an inch, because you will end up taking a mile.

Kill the attachment.

Chapter End Notes

Is it truly a genjutsu in an ItaSaku fic if Inner Sakura doesn't throw herself at Itachi? Only this time, we decided to go the extra mile and have a threesome. I'm sure Itachi's getting all sorts of ideas for the creative application of kage bunshin from this! Especially since he basically skipped puberty in canon, and he's now experiencing a delayed version.

Also, it irritates me that I had to use phrasing based on the imperial system when I, a stubborn Asian, want to use metric for actual measurements. But "give them a centimetre and they'll take a kilometre" just doesn't quite pack the same linguistic punch.

To Love is To Protect

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Silence reigned. For once, Itachi was not content to leave it as it was. There was so much he wanted to say, so much he wanted to ask about, but all of it either sounded inane or intrusive.

“Will she be alright?” he finally asked. He knew Brainwashed Sakura was just a construct of Sakura’s own mind and yet, he could not shake the feeling of responsibility he felt towards her. Perhaps it was because she was so insistent on viewing him as her protector.

Sakura’s features twisted into a grimace. “Who knows,” she muttered. “She’ll probably sulk a little bit and then get over it and come after you, thinking that she just needs to try harder to get you to fall for her.”

“You mentioned it hurt you to watch yourself as her. But it appears to go further than that. You pity her, and you also dislike her,” he observed. It was the only way to reconcile both the look of compassion on his Sakura’s face as he broke her alter ego’s heart, and the irritation she displayed at other times when the topic of Brainwashed Sakura came up.

“Should have known you’d pick up on that,” she muttered. She yanked up a few blades of grass and proceeded to shred them. Itachi waited patiently for her to work through the emotions she was experiencing.

“Yes,” she sighed finally. “I don’t like her. She’s exactly who I used to be. A weak, spineless thing who would have happily sacrificed everything for someone who couldn’t care less for her.”

Itachi could not stop himself from flinching at Sakura’s declaration. *It’s not true*, he wanted to scream. *I do care for you. More than you could imagine.* Thankfully, she appeared to misinterpret his reaction.

“I am being a bit unfair,” she allowed. “There was a point of time when Sasuke-kun cared. I can’t even count the number of times he jumped in front of me or Naruto to protect us. And each time, he insisted that his body moved on its own, and that he couldn’t control it.”

Itachi felt a lump in his throat as she spoke. Somehow, his brother had grown into a shinobi who got his priorities right – a shinobi who put his teammates first. No wonder she'd loved him. And then, Itachi had come along, unable to leave well alone, and driven Sasuke straight into Orochimaru's net. *Some older brother I am.*

He had to get her off this topic before he revealed too much of his true feelings. "What does that have to do with your feelings towards Brainwashed Sakura?"

She smiled humourlessly. "I would have given everything for Sasuke-kun. Everything. I was so obsessed with having him that I didn't think far enough to make sure that my 'everything' actually had something of substance. I forgot why I even wanted to be a shinobi in the first place, and cared more about wearing cute clothes on missions than on actually carrying out said mission. I was weak in every possible way. Physically weak, the liability of the team. No special techniques or jutsus, no niche role I filled. Mentally weak, focusing more on how Sasuke-kun saw me than on whether my teammates were safe, and thinking of ways to be of use to my team. Emotionally weak, I – "

At that, she broke off with a choked gasp. She took a breath, exhaled, and fixed her eyes on a point far in the horizon. "I begged him to take him with me when he left," she finally said, refusing to meet his gaze.

"I would have deserted the village, *my home*, everyone I loved. I would have turned my back on them to join a murderer who probably would have killed me straight off the bat. All for a boy who knocked me out and left me on a goddamned bench. And that's not even counting what happened the next time I saw him."

"What happened?" Itachi asked with trepidation, almost afraid to hear her words which simultaneously condemned his brother and confirmed the extent of her love for him. But he needed to know. None of the periodic reports he'd received from his intelligence agents had mentioned even a hint of an encounter between Sasuke and his old teammates.

She exhaled. "I don't want to talk about it," she said. "In any case, it doesn't matter anymore. I'm stronger now. I'll never go back to being that girl. I'll just deal with seeing Brainwashed Sakura until everything's over. Then I'll be dead, and I won't have to think about any of this crap anymore." She stood, and stretched, popping her joints. She turned back to him with a decidedly false smile fixed on her face. "So, are we going to get around to genjutsu lessons or are we

just going to sit around talking all day?"

Itachi again ignored all reason in favour of his heart. It really shouldn't surprise him anymore, considering just how many rash decisions he'd made in the past days because of Sakura. He stood up and took her hands in his. "Sakura," he said. He needed her to understand. He would not hide behind the cloak of formality anymore. "You have not allowed life to beat you down. You were abandoned by someone you loved. You lost your father. You have lived the life of a shinobi – you have known hardship. But you have not allowed any of that to break you. You have picked yourself up and you kept going. Every moment you have lived, every breath you have taken, has moulded you into the person you are today – the kunoichi I have grown to respect and admire, who made the best she could of captivity. Who turned it into an *advantage* for herself. You are not weak, Sakura. You never have been. You have been strong all your life."

He almost dropped her hands then, certain that this must be the instance in which he'd overstepped. Any moment now, she'd unleash her temper on him. But it was worth it, he decided. He could not stand watching this beautiful, strong, amazing woman call herself weak and think so lowly of herself.

And then, he looked into her eyes, and saw the moisture welling within. "Itachi," she whispered. And then, she extricated her hands from his, and brought them to hold his face, cupping his cheeks. "Oh, Itachi," she sighed, and then, she tiptoed, bringing herself as close to him as possible, and pressed her lips against his.

Euphoria erupted within him. *She* kissed him. She had chosen this. They were still in his genjutsu, yes, but she was free to choose her actions, and they both knew it. And she *kissed* him. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he lifted her off the ground so that she would not need to strain herself to reach him. She locked her legs around him, bringing him even closer, and he caressed her lips with his tongue, begging to be allowed entry. And she granted it, generous, gracious, queen among women that she was.

His hands roved her back, temporarily sating his desire for more. He desperately wanted to feel her bare skin, yes, but he'd make do with being able to touch her curves and to taste her lips.

Reluctantly, he broke away, lowering her body back to the ground and releasing her. He'd experienced the closest someone like him could

ever get to heaven in those precious moments, and that was enough, he told himself. He was fortunate that they'd done this in a genjutsu, where he could ignore inconvenient realities such as his pathetic lung capacity.

With her flushed cheeks and her eyes shining with emotion, he could barely resist diving in for a second taste. Still, somehow, through some superhuman effort, he resisted. Because he knew in that moment that if he exerted the effort to, he could win her heart. She'd already displayed some measure of attraction toward him. Whether that was because of his resemblance to Sasuke did not matter. She could come to love him instead of his brother. They could be happy together.

And then, he would die – if not at Sasuke's hands, then from his deteriorating lungs, and she would be alone. Again.

And if there was one thing he understood from their conversations, it was that she was still deeply affected by her father's death, and by Sasuke's abandonment.

He could not wound her the same way. He *would* not.

And so, he smiled gently at her, and said, "As enjoyable as this has been, I believe you wanted a genjutsu lesson? We have been in here for quite some time already, and I do not have the chakra to sustain this for much longer."

Her hands flew to her mouth in consternation. "I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed. "I didn't even think about how much of a toll this must be taking on you."

"It's alright. I gathered that you are not experienced in casting genjutsu, and as such, I cannot expect you to be aware of the amount of chakra consumption involved."

She nodded. "Kakashi-sensei once told me I was a genjutsu-type, but he said it didn't make sense to train me in genjutsu at that point of time because my reserves weren't very big. And afterwards, when I became a medic-nin, it became absolutely crucial to conserve as much of my chakra for healing as possible. My experience is more in detecting and breaking genjutsu."

Itachi almost snorted. "Yes, I'm sure it had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Kakashi-senpai is absolute rubbish at anything except the most basic of genjutsu."

She blinked, startled, and Itachi cursed to himself as he realized his mistake. *Senpai*. How had he maintained his cover so thoroughly for ten years, only to grow so careless at this critical juncture? He suddenly wondered if he was subconsciously *allowing* his control to slip, to pull himself back from the destiny he'd chained himself to.

Thankfully, he didn't have to think on his mindset further, as Sakura chose to ignore his slip. She grinned impishly, and Itachi felt something warm within him at the sight of her looking so carefree. "I suppose I should have guessed," she laughed. "Genius shinobi he might be, but I suppose he's human too."

Itachi nodded, assuming a more serious expression. "Indeed. In any case, while having a large store of chakra would certainly *help* with casting genjutsu, it is not a necessary prerequisite. Remember that you do not need to be able to incapacitate enemies entirely with genjutsu, as I choose to do. You have skills that work well enough in combat. Genjutsu is simply a tool to add to your arsenal to compensate for your limitations against long-range fighters."

He hoped she did not pick up on the fact that the genjutsu he'd cast for their conversation was a full immersion of all the senses. It was bad enough he had decided to waste chakra to be able to catch hints of her scent. It was worse that his extravagance had allowed him to have decidedly enjoyable amorous moments with all three of the personalities that inhabited her mind.

Sakura's mouth dropped open. "How the hell do you know so much about my fighting style?" she demanded.

Itachi simply gazed back at her. "Remember when I went to retrieve your pack? I saw the aftermath of your battle against Sasori and Deidara, and I heard the townspeople speaking of it. It was simple enough to extrapolate from there."

Sakura continued to study him with an intensity that was beginning to feel rather uncomfortable. "You went all the way to Sendai to grab my pack?" she finally asked.

Oh. Yet another slip. "Yes," Itachi replied. He had to salvage this somehow, act like it was all part of the plan. "I was curious about what you were so desperate to possess that you made an attempt to seduce an s-ranked missing-nin."

Sakura clearly looked as if she wanted to question him further, but thankfully manage to restrain herself. He desperately needed to do

some self-examination sooner rather than later – such levels of sloppiness were utterly unacceptable. “So how do I use genjutsu without using too much chakra?” she asked.

“You focus on specific senses,” Itachi answered, relieved to finally be on a more neutral topic. “Most people make the mistake of thinking of genjutsu in terms of the all-consuming illusion, but it really just refers to a family of techniques where you trick the mind into perceiving something that is not truly there. And in a combat situation, even a second of distraction can cede you an invaluable advantage.”

She nodded, understanding dawning in her eyes. “So I could use a sound, maybe. Get them to look somewhere else for just a split second and fly at them with my fists.”

“Yes. Or a shadow, or a flash of colour that would hint at an ally performing the body flicker technique would work as well. But in any case, I believe that you may not even need to use the usual genjutsu techniques to achieve the desired effect. I understand you inflicted an injury on Deidara with medical ninjutsu when you fought him? He would not stop complaining about it for days.”

She grinned again. “Yes – I induced a seizure by overloading his brain circuits with electrical signals.” She paused, considering his words. “Wait – you mean – you don’t think I could, with medical ninjutsu – “

Itachi nodded, pleased at how quickly she caught on. “I do. I believe that with your knowledge of human anatomy, and your proficiency with medical ninjutsu, you would be able to cast genjutsu by directly stimulating specific brain regions. You would simply need to use yin release instead of yang release as you do for healing. It would be more intuitive for you, and you would not need to worry about concerns such as having a focus to channel your genjutsu through, or about concentrating in order to generate the image you wish your target to perceive. You can allow their brains to do the work.”

She frowned reflectively. “I need physical contact in order to heal, though,” she said. “I can barely even heal myself without placing my hands on my injuries. This might not work if we’re talking about working against a long-range fighter...”

“Try it,” Itachi urged. “You never know what handicaps are self-imposed due to our own flawed assumptions. Many of my brethren believed that Sharingan-enhanced genjutsu could only be applied with the eyes as a focus, and they limited themselves to requiring eye

contact. I discovered for myself by testing these assumptions that pointing a finger could work as well as a focus to channel the illusion, and that I could even anchor genjutsus to objects by imbuing them with chakra.”

She nodded, seeing the logic behind his reasoning. “Alright,” she said. “I guess you’ve given me a lot to think about. I’ll try it out with a kage bunshin when we’re in a location where you can put up some barriers.”

Against his better judgement, Itachi interrupted. “Why not try it out here? Since we are within my genjutsu, you’d be able to experience for yourself the effects of what you make me perceive. The drawback with applying genjutsu through direct brain stimulation would be that the target’s perception depends entirely on their own brains, and it would be difficult for you to plan to incorporate it in a combat situation. By practising on me, you might be able to develop specific illusions that would be generated for any shinobi.”

Sakura’s eyebrows shot up. “You want me to channel chakra *directly into your brain*? I could kill you if I make a mistake! At least a kage bunshin would only dissipate.”

Itachi allowed just a trickle of his emotion towards her to show on his usually calm mask. “I trust you,” he said simply. And he did. She was skilled enough that she would not make a mistake, and he had chosen to believe that she did not possess any malicious intent towards him. It helped, of course, that he had spent some time in her mindscape, and only saw the three personalities.

But he also knew that when suspicion coloured what one perceived, no evidence could convince them otherwise. Every bit of proof could be twisted to have a sinister meaning. Had he insisted on believing that Sakura was only biding her time before attacking, he could have theorized that the “real” Sakura was hiding somewhere, not revealing herself. After all, it had taken his Sakura some time to show up.

He’d already decided he did not want to think that way. Not with Sakura. Not after he’d seen how that same suspicion had twisted his clan, perceiving even attempted honours from Konoha as insults. Forming Konoha’s police force? A shift away from the power of governing, rather than recognition of their strength. The move to the outskirts of Konoha? Being made irrelevant, rather than being provided with space and natural features where they could practice their signature Katon jutsus. The suspicion had, as a whole, twisted

their love for their village into resentment and bitterness. The Curse of Hatred, manifested on a clan-wide scale.

He would not repeat their mistakes. He would trust the woman he loved.

He sat with his back to her. "I'm ready whenever you are," he said, closing his eyes.

Sakura attempted to calm her nerves. She was going to attempt an entirely theoretical and experimental jutsu on Itachi. And he appeared to be entirely at ease with it. He'd made himself entirely defenceless – his back was to her, and he had *closed his eyes*. She could turn his brain to mush if she chose, and he would be powerless to stop it.

It was humbling, and she could feel the euphoria going to her head. He was opening up to her. He was accepting her.

She'd been terrified after that impulsive kiss that he would reject her again. Instead, he'd given her one of his beautiful smiles, and she'd felt her heart turn to goo. And he'd done nothing but affirm his belief in her and her strength the entire time.

As much as she knew it was a bad idea, that no good could come of it, she could feel herself starting to fall for him. And based on how eagerly he'd reciprocated all physical contact so far, she knew that with time, he could fall for her too. This wasn't like with Sasuke. She was coming to realize that Itachi was more than capable of combining care for his partner with respect for her strength and her independence. Sasuke had not been capable of either, let alone doing both.

Please, let me find proof that he's Konoha's spy. Let me clear his name. Let me bring him back with me. Let me build a life with this man.

Please.

Sighing, she redirected her attention to the task at hand. She could make wishes for her love life later. She mentally recapped the structure of the brain – she would make her first attempt simple. A single pulse of chakra applied to the visual cortex, the primary processing centre for the vision. She would apply it using her hands as well. Itachi might believe she could apply this version of genjutsu from a distance, but she wasn't willing to risk it on a first try.

She took a deep breath, and pulsed her chakra.

Itachi's eyes snapped open, and what appeared to be a star flashed briefly and brightly in the sky, before the darkness returned.

"It worked!" Sakura squealed. "Oh, thank you, thank you Itachi!" She threw her arms around him, pressing herself against his back. He'd believed in her, and helped her achieve something she'd never thought herself capable of before. The beginnings of a brand-new branch of techniques. Already, her mind was whirring with potential applications of using brain stimulation for genjutsu, now that he'd helped her realize that it was possible.

And with that, she knew. She was no longer starting to fall for him.

She was absolutely and unquestionably in love.

Itachi found himself reluctant to dispel the genjutsu, even though they'd remained within it for hours. They'd sparred, and Sakura had practised using the newly developed genjutsu technique to catch him off guard and turn the tides of the battle. He'd still won every single spar, of course – there was no way he was going to give anything less than his best. Not when winning meant he had a perfectly acceptable reason to pin her body beneath his. And if the adrenaline had overtaken them a couple of times, neither Itachi nor Sakura were complaining. He would indulge just for that night, he told himself. One night could not hurt.

And on releasing it, he immediately regretted it, for it was Brainwashed Sakura who awoke, ensconced within his arms. She looked up at him, tears welling in her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then appeared to think better of it. She shook her head, and removed herself from his embrace. She silently picked up her bedroll from where she'd set it up, next to his, and began shifting it to the other side of the fire.

"Sakura?" Itachi asked tentatively. He cared for her too, he realized. Even in spite of how uncomfortable he was with her blind faith and love. Even though that love stemmed from crimes he had not committed.

How could he not care? After all, she was a part of Sakura too. It did not matter whether it was Inner Sakura or Brainwashed Sakura that stood before him – they were both parts of her. Brainwashed Sakura was the part that loved without limits, with a fierce, unquestioning,

intensity. The part that had broken over and over for the sake of love, and continued to choose to love anyway.

She turned to him. “I understand, anata,” she said, a gentle and sad smile on her face. “I do not wish to cause you pain. I will give you the space you need.”

He remained silent as she finished moving her bedroll, and slipped into it and covered her face. The gap between them that had appeared to be closed just moments ago now widened into an uncrossable chasm. And later that night, as he fell into a restless slumber, he listened to her quiet sobs from across the clearing, and was more aware of the hollow space within him than ever. He again found himself wishing to be back in his rooms at the Ame base, where he had a comforting warmth and a feeling of home at his back.

Chapter End Notes

I think this story's Sakura might have a praise kink.

And, we've reached the end of the second act! This one was informally titled "Doubt & Trust", and it was about Itachi and Sakura coming to terms with their feelings for each other.

Illusions and Dreams

Chapter Notes

NSFW warning on this chapter! Read with caution. I also made heavy use of my education in neuropsychology for this chapter, so if you need any terms defined, do refer to the index at the bottom of the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They reached a small town the next afternoon, and Itachi-sama summoned Konan and Kisame, and informed them that they would spend the night there before moving on. Konan looked as if she wanted to insist that they continue to press on, given that their actual destination was another three days away. Thankfully, Kisame chimed in that he'd always enjoyed the freshwater fish this town had to offer, and that he would greatly enjoy having more time to spend there, overruling Konan before she could say a word.

Konan's face grew pinched with tension as Itachi-sama and Kisame quickly decided between them that Sakura's beloved would bring her to the town's largest inn, while Kisame and Konan would camp at the outskirts of the town. Konan again began to protest, stating that they would need to meet up to plan.

"Konan, I don't know about you, but I'd rather have a restful night's sleep than listen to those two going at it like rabbits," Kisame said, jerking his thumb towards her beloved, who only smirked. The sight of it made Sakura want to rub her thighs together, but she controlled herself. Her beloved preferred that... *other Sakura* to her. She understood and respected his reasoning, and knew that she could not change his feelings. But she could comport herself well, so that she would not simply be handing her beloved over to that harlot on a silver platter.

Konan narrowed her eyes. "I will not be driven outside simply because Itachi cannot control himself, or because *you*," she said, glaring at Kisame, "are suddenly squeamish. Kisame, you may camp wherever you please. I am going to find myself an inn as well." So saying, she turned and stormed off. Sakura sighed privately. Even Konan's furious departure managed to look so elegant and graceful. Perhaps if she managed to cultivate that quality, Itachi-sama would be more attracted to her? Enough to overcome his regret?

Kisame shrugged his shoulders at Itachi-sama. “Well, what can you do. At least you can hope that she’ll go to a different inn?”

Her beloved only sighed; his tiredness was more apparent to Sakura than ever. She sorely wished she could do something to alleviate the tensions that were weighing him down. “We can hope,” he murmured. “In any case, I do thank you for attempting to assist.”

Kisame snorted. “Well, I’m going to head off. I wasn’t kidding about this town’s fish – it’s almost as good as my favourite place back in Kiri.” So saying, the enormous blue man walked away, neatly creating a path through the milling townsfolk through sheer presence.

Sakura’s beloved wrapped his arm around her waist, and she sighed in contentment, leaning her head against his shoulder. At least he was willing to touch her in public now, she thought with a smile, as she allowed him to guide her to their destination.

“We will take your most expensive room for one night,” Itachi said, as Sakura smiled pleasantly at the clerk, as if an anvil was not pounding the inside of her head. It was a little early to drop the persona, she knew, but she was strangely upset by just how possessive Brainwashed Sakura was of Itachi. She sighed privately. Of all the ridiculous situations she’d ever expected to find herself in, feeling jealous of a different version of herself had never been one of them. But she did have reason to be, she admitted to herself, as she again went through Brainwashed Sakura’s memories of being on Itachi’s lap, feeling the heat of his body warming her and smelling his intoxicating scent. Brainwashed Sakura could initiate affectionate gestures towards him at any time – it was part and parcel of her persona, and Itachi was aware of it. Sakura herself, however... she needed either strong emotion or adrenaline before she could work up the nerve to kiss and be kissed by him in turn.

“Very good, Shinobi-san,” the clerk responded, looking through a register. “Ah. The premier suite is available.” He paused, eyeing Itachi’s arm around Sakura’s waist. His voice turned hesitant. “Pardon me for asking, Shinobi-san, but it is policy that we must enquire this of all customers who will stay in the premier suite. Would you prefer to sleep in one room, or in separate rooms? If you would like to sleep in one room, the second bedroom can be converted to a study room or a sitting room if you’d prefer.”

“Separate,” Itachi said without missing a beat, and Sakura privately

groaned, echoed by both Inner and Brainwashed Sakura. He was just being his usual courteous self, she knew. He would not presume that she would be interested in sharing his bed when there was no necessity for it. Konan might still come snooping, but it was unlikely that she would inquire about their sleeping arrangements. Still, for him to be so quick to decide, with no hesitation – Sakura had to admit, it stung her pride a little. It felt as if all the kisses they'd shared the previous night had never occurred. She wondered if he thought they didn't count, since it happened within a genjutsu. The thought left her feeling unexpectedly forlorn. Did all his sweet words then mean nothing too?

The clerk shot another confused glance at Itachi's and Sakura's closeness before proceeding to fill out the necessary paperwork. Needing some distance to process her hurt, Sakura gently untwined his arm from around herself, and looked up at him with a neutral subject in mind. "The most expensive room?" she asked, desperately wishing again that she was capable of performing that single eyebrow raise the Akatsuki were all so good at. It would add so much to the sarcastic effect she was going for. "And here I was thinking you were thrifty," she teased.

Itachi bestowed her with another of his rare smiles. In fact, she realized that she had *never* seen him look so carefree before – there was mirth dancing in his eyes, and his tear troughs appeared to almost fade. "We're travelling on a mission issued by Akatsuki," he explained. "That means the organization bears all expenses. And I have never felt the need to hold back when I'm spending on their dime. Not when they've gathered so much funds from my efforts."

Wow. That was actually... pretty rebellious in an underhanded way. "And nobody ever tells you off or anything for wasting the organization's money?" she asked, almost filled with disbelief that it could be so easy. Itachi shrugged. "Kakuzu grumbles, of course – if he had his way, we would never set foot in an inn, or even buy any food. We'd constantly camp outdoors and hunt for our meals. He would probably even protest maintaining the base as an unnecessary expense. But the rest of us are determined that we will not sacrifice our comforts when it is us who fill Akatsuki's coffers."

And then, the clerk returned with their keys, and they were moving up to the suite. Sakura was pleasantly surprised by just how luxurious the entire place was – she had an entire king-sized bed all to herself! Who would have thought that a small town such as this would have such a wonderful inn? Though if members of Akatsuki passed by

regularly, and they all spent as much as Itachi implied they did, it made sense that the inn would make quite a killing just from their business.

She laughed and bounced onto the bed, uncaring of how childish she must seem. Perhaps it was good that Itachi had procured separate rooms for them, she reflected. Perhaps –

Oh.

Oh.

She smirked as an idea came to her. It was reckless and impulsive and beyond stupid, but Sakura was beyond caring. She deserved this, and she was going to give herself a gift that she sorely needed.

“Um, Itachi?” she asked tentatively.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Could I... I mean, would you mind if I had some privacy?”

He looked at her, still laying stretched out on the bed, and then to the door. “Of course,” he murmured, and moved to close the door. She yelped and sat up. “No, that’s not what I meant,” she said quickly. His forehead creased, and he looked utterly bewildered. He looked to her, and to the door of her room again. He slowly turned, looking at his bedroom, which was opposite hers, and then the living area, with its sofa and television, and then was facing Sakura again.

“You wish me to leave?” he asked softly, his voice sounding almost hurt.

She nodded. “Yes. There are some techniques I want to try out, and uh, I’d rather not risk having anyone within a certain radius when I do.”

Technically, she was telling the truth.

Understanding dawned on his features. Sakura wondered what it was he thought she was going to do. “Of course,” he murmured again. “I will remind you not to use the summoning jutsu under any circumstances. Konan’s sensory range is quite large, and while I have set out the protections we will need, she will still be able to sense any large fluctuations in chakra. How long do you need me to be gone?”

“A couple of hours would be good,” Sakura replied, sorting through his words. She frowned. “Would kage bunshin be detected?”

“That depends. How many clones are you planning on creating?”

“Just the one,” she assured him. “And I’m not planning to imbue her with too much chakra, either.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “The spike should not be too high, then. It might not set off Konan’s alarm bells, and in any case, even if it is detected, I can justify the use of a kage bunshin more than the summoning jutsu.” He paused, and looked into her eyes. “I *can* still train with you. If it’s genjutsu you’re working on. Or any other topics of interest.”

Sakura almost groaned again. For the first time, she cursed him and his sheer thoughtfulness. She couldn’t reject him outright, either, or let it be too obvious she was hiding something from him. He’d get that look again, the one which made Sakura feel as if she’d kicked a puppy.

She smiled at him. “It’s not exactly genjutsu, though our lesson last night did give me some ideas,” she explained. Sticking to the bare bones of the truth would be best. “But it has the potential to cause a lot more damage than me messing with your visual cortex – I mean, that’s still near the surface of the brain, and relatively easier to fix if something goes wrong. If it works, I promise I’ll show you what I figured out later tonight. I just don’t want to risk anything right now.” At least, she’d try out a different variant of it. While she would greatly enjoy using her idea on him, she did not think he would be as appreciative. Either that, or he’d be too appreciative. Neither option was one Sakura was willing to think too much about at the moment.

He nodded again, his face back in its mask. Sakura gratefully noted that it was the one that looked more at ease, and that while his tear troughs were as prominent as ever, at least his eyes appeared relaxed.

“Two hours,” he promised. He donned his Akatsuki cloak again, picking it up from where he’d neatly left it hanging, and left in his usual quiet manner, gently shutting the door behind him.

Sakura grinned. It was time for her to make the worst decision she’d made since her captivity had begun – actually, it might be the worst decision she’d made in her entire life, apart from her decision to pursue Sasuke as a romantic interest.

But she was still going to do it anyway.

Sakura formed the hand seals to summon a shadow clone, imbuing it with just enough chakra to perform one technique, upon which the clone would dissipate. She probably could have done without the clone – she'd healed herself enough times to be extremely familiar with her bodily systems – but she did not want to risk essentially performing an experimental neurological procedure while totally blind. Using the clone would help her visualize the pathways in the brain more clearly.

The clone concentrated chakra in her hands, and then gently tapped the back of Sakura's neck, directing pulses of chakra to a few specific brain regions. She used more chakra than she'd used on Itachi the previous night, since she wanted this particular genjutsu to last for a while. The visual cortex, the auditory cortex, and the somatosensory cortex – she wanted the full sensory experience. And of course, the most important brain region for her little experiment – the nucleus accumbens, the reward and pleasure centre of the brain.

Immediately, Sakura felt a haze of pleasure wash over her. Oh, this was *good*. She normally needed to work over herself for at least half an hour before she felt this aroused. To get to this stage without any stimulation or without any material... yes, this was a useful jutsu indeed.

She looked up, and she could see Itachi sitting on the armchair across from her bed. Her breath caught. The illusion was realistic indeed – she would have sworn he was actually there, if not for the fact that she knew visual hallucinations were part of the intended effect, and the fact that she could not sense his chakra signature at all.

Best of all, her illusory Itachi was naked, with a dangerous, sexy, smirk on his face, and cock in his hand.

“Touch yourself for me, Sakura,” he purred, his onyx eyes blazing. She shivered, and untied her robe and pushed both flaps to the side so that he could see her bare body. She paused, waiting for a reaction, but he remained utterly still. *Waiting*. As a predator would watch its prey.

Exhaling shakily, she trailed her left hand down to her clit, and began stroking it gently, with slow, sensuous strokes, even though slow was the last thing she wanted. But no, she would not allow him to so easily control her pleasure. She wanted to make him ache for her as she ached for him.

Her right hand trailed lightly across her breasts. “Do you like that,

Itachi?" she asked huskily. "Do you wish it was your hands touching me, instead of just watching from across the room?"

He smirked again, and oh, the *hunger* scorching within his eyes could by itself make her climax. She pinched a nipple, rubbing at it until the nub hardened.

"I know what you're doing," he murmured. Suddenly, his body was above hers – as close as it could be without actually touching her. Her hand immediately left her nipple to reach for his face, but he easily moved out of her reach.

"Patience, Sakura. You will be screaming with pleasure soon enough," he promised, and the heat in his voice was driving her absolutely insane. "But first, I want to watch you fall apart. Show me how you like to be touched."

Oh, that was it. She should have known he would not have been so easily swayed – even the Itachi of her imagination was a stubborn ass. She growled and began rubbing at her clit furiously. Her right hand plunged into her cunt, and she was fucking herself with two fingers already – she was that wet. She wanted to feel his touch. She wanted to watch him become consumed by her, as she was consumed by him. She added a third finger, imagining it was Itachi's cock thrusting into her.

"Itachi," she begged. "Itachi, I need you so badly. I want you to take me, Itachi. Please!"

His body moved off hers, and she almost sobbed at the loss of his heat. He crouched in front of her, eyes blazing crimson as he studied how she brought herself to climax.

"That's it, Sakura," he encouraged. "You're such a vision. So maddeningly divine. I want nothing more than to take you a thousand times, and engrave my name onto your lips."

"Then do it!" she gasped. "What are you waiting for?"

"When I take you, it will not simply be because you are aroused. It will be because you want me, and only me." He flickered next to her, and whispered in her ear, his voice low and rough with desire. "When you can prove that to me, I will make you mine."

The combination of his words, his voice, and his proximity pushed her over the edge to reach her first climax. She bit down on her lip to

keep herself from screaming his name. Itachi had extremely sharp senses, and she did not want to risk him hearing her call for him, and returning to their suite early.

The eyes of the Itachi of her imagination darkened. "How impertinent," he teased. "You knew I wanted to hear you screaming for me."

"And you knew I wanted you to touch me, but we can't always get what we want, can we?" she sassed. Her orgasm was making her brave. And then, he was on top of her, kissing her senseless. He swirled his tongue around hers, and Sakura thrust her hips up into his, wanting more. He broke away from her, smirking. "How greedy," he purred. He trailed a finger down her slit, collecting her juices. He sucked on that finger, and Sakura *throbbed*. "Delicious," he murmured.

"More, Itachi, please," she begged.

He laughed hoarsely, and lowered his lips to her breasts, worshipping them with his tongue. "So beautiful," he panted. "So perfect." Her hands tightened in his hair, and she keened from the sheer pleasure of it. "Itachi," she wailed. "Please, Itachi! I need you inside me."

"Hmmm. I don't think you need me that much. You haven't even begun screaming yet."

"I'm wearing your necklace, Itachi. I'm already yours. Please, just... Please!" she begged. She felt as if she was going to explode.

His eyes blazed with hunger, and he lowered his lips to her nipples, biting and sucking at them, and she felt him lazily rubbing circles into her clit, and Sakura let all her self-control go, succumbing to the sheer madness of the moment, allowing her desires to take over her. If illusory Itachi was all she could get, she would take him, wholeheartedly, every other concern be damned.

"Itachi! Take me, Itachi!" she cried out.

Itachi usually only drank on two occasions. The first was the 12th of October, the anniversary of the day he had murdered his entire clan in cold blood and tortured his beloved brother. It was approaching soon – in a few days, actually. The second was the 20th of July, the anniversary of the day Sasuke had defected from Konoha. He drank for the first to mute his grief, and for the second to mute his sheer bitterness and anger toward his brother, who had so easily thrown

aside everything Itachi had sacrificed for him.

At that moment, though, he drank to mute his shame.

He downed seven shots of sake in quick succession, and was contemplating an eighth. In spite of his numerous resolutions to keep himself from Sakura, to spare her the inevitable broken heart, he had utterly failed. He was drawn to her as a moth to a flame, only in this situation he was the flame, and she would be the one who would be scorched.

He groaned, and buried his head in his hands. It should have been so easy to keep himself away from her. He was highly practiced at making sacrifices for those he loved, after all. But those sacrifices were done and dusted, and did not need to be revisited again. The sacrifice his love for Sakura demanded, however... it was one that needed to be made over and over. His self-control was not that strong, and he loathed to admit it, true as it was. Especially when she looked at him with those trusting jade eyes, or when she just *looked* at him as if she wanted him to bend her over and take her then and there.

And oh, how tempted he was.

He was just about to decide to succumb to oblivion and order not just an eighth shot, but a ninth and tenth as well when he sensed Konan's chakra signature headed straight for their inn. He sighed in frustration. It appeared she'd failed to find separate lodgings after all, and even though only one of the two hours he had promised to Sakura had passed, he needed to head back up immediately. It would not do for Konan to find him sitting at the bar of the inn – though honestly with all the luxuries it had it really should be called a hotel instead – instead of fucking Sakura's brains out as they all expected he was doing.

He winced at the crudeness of his language. Setting down a tip for the bartender, he muted his chakra signature entirely, and sped up to his and Sakura's suite. He needed to be there before Konan arrived.

And then, as he silently slipped in the door, he heard Sakura *moaning*. All thoughts, all resolutions he had been building toward crumbled. All intentions he had to respect her privacy dissipated with that single sound.

He stood outside her door, listening to the sounds of her helpless mewling. It sounded as if she was with a partner, and yet, he knew for a fact that there was no one in there with her. His protections had not

been disturbed at all, and in any case, the only chakra signature in there was Sakura's. He wondered if the purpose of her kage bunshin was to give herself a companion, and decided that he should have thought of that before too.

And then, he heard her wailing, and he froze. "Itachi! Oh, Itachi! Just like that, Itachi! Yes, yes, yes!"

She was pleasuring herself to thoughts of *him*. He felt an almost savage pride course through his veins, and it took all the remaining shreds of his self-control not to go in there and give her exactly what she wanted. However, he had none left to stop himself from shamelessly listening in, and secretly joining her. His Akatsuki cloak fell to the floor, his pants and boxers were pushed down, and his cock was in his hands, and he was furiously stroking it to the sound of Sakura crying out his name.

"Yes, Sakura," he whispered, imagining it was her small, calloused palms stroking him, remembering how Inner Sakura had caressed him.

Sakura had already climaxed twice, and her illusory Itachi seemed determined to ensure she achieved a third.

His hands were greedily squeezing her ass, and slamming her onto his onto his cock over and over. Every time he hit that spot within her, she saw stars. And all she could do was helplessly call his name over and over, thanking him for the gift of pleasure he was giving her.

"Itachi!!!!!!," she moaned raggedly, not even caring if her two hours were up, if Itachi was back, if he could hear her. The thought that he might be listening to her pleasuring herself, wondering if he did, wondering whether he would come in to join her, sent her to the heights she desperately needed. "Itachi!" she cried again as she came, and then she was flopping back onto her bed, covered in sweat and satisfyingly spent, and the illusion dissipated.

Itachi barely managed to suppress his moan as he came to the sounds and scent of Sakura's own orgasm. Engrossed as she was, he wondered if she would even notice if he made a sound, but it was not a risk he was willing to take. He had already indulged in her enough – far more than he'd ever intended. He sighed heavily; the bliss of his orgasm was rapidly consumed by the shame that was his constant companion. He pulled his pants back up, uncaring of the mess, and glanced at the clock. He had another ten minutes before he was due back.

Quickly, he sped to the bathroom to clean himself up. He'd slip back out of the suite, return to the bar to drown his latest round of shame, and then come back as if he'd never entered the suite to begin with. The coast should be clear – Konan's chakra signature was safely ensconced in one of the rooms far from his and Sakura's.

Once she was rested and showered, Sakura knocked on Itachi's door. She had promised to show him the technique, after all.

He opened his door, and she immediately smelled it. After five years as Tsunade's apprentice, she was very well-acquainted with the smell of sake indeed – even in the relatively smaller quantity Itachi appeared to have consumed. "You've been drinking!" she said in shock. Itachi had not struck her as the sort to imbibe.

He nodded slowly, and she realized he was leaning against the door frame, and not standing upright like he usually did. He must be tipsy, if not drunk, she realized. She hesitated. She *had* promised, but if his judgement was compromised, he might not be able to give informed consent – something Sakura took extremely seriously as a medical professional.

"I guess I'll leave you to it, then," she mumbled, and turned to go. And stopped, as his hand gripped her arm tightly. She looked up at him, and realized there was almost a desperation there.

"What did you want?" he asked quietly. His speech wasn't slurred. Not drunk, then. Probably just loosened up.

"I thought I'd show you the technique I worked on earlier this afternoon, but uh, I didn't think, you're clearly doing something else. We can do this later too."

"You want to try your technique on me?" he asked, and he sounded incredulous for some reason. She realized that his cheeks were pink, and revised her opinion. He might actually be drunk after all, if his face was that flushed.

"I did promise," she said calmly. "But there really isn't any hurry."

"No, I want to know," he decided. He opened his door wider. "Come on in."

There wasn't a separate armchair in his room like there was in hers. There was only the bed and a wardrobe, and so she settled on the bed,

with her back leaning against the pillows and her legs crossed. He assumed a similar pose next to her.

“So basically, I got the idea based on what we did in the genjutsu yesterday,” she began. The colour in his cheeks deepened. “Are you sure you’re alright?” she asked, placing her hand on his forehead. “Your temperature seems fine, so you’re not coming down with something. But maybe you need time to sober up – “

“I’m fine, Sakura,” he said in a tone that brooked no disagreement. “So, you got the idea in the genjutsu?” he prompted, when it appeared that she wasn’t going to continue.

She glanced at him again, and realized that he was referring to his make-out session with her personas. *Did he really think* – she decided not to dwell on that thought further.

“Yes,” she replied. “I realized that if I’m able to cast a genjutsu by stimulating the sensory regions of the brain, then theoretically, I should be able to do so by stimulating the emotional areas of the brain too. Stuff like fear and disgust. And if I combine the stimulation of sensory areas together with that of emotional areas, it’ll be an illusion tailored specifically to the target.”

“So that’s what you were doing this afternoon,” Itachi murmured, and Sakura could almost feel herself trembling from a combination of anxiety and anticipation. Did he know? No, that wasn’t possible, she decided. She’d allowed herself to be consumed by her genjutsu, but surely, she would have sensed Itachi’s presence, as attuned to it as she’d become over the past two weeks they’d spent together.

Itachi went on.

“An intelligent idea, allowing their own minds to generate those illusions, based on their own experiences which are evoked by those emotions,” he concluded. “Your creativity never fails to astound me, Sakura. One of the major drawbacks of my Tsukuyomi is that it requires a great deal of concentration and chakra from me to incapacitate the target, since I have to impose my vision of the genjutsu on their minds, and I have to monitor the target continually to ensure that the things I am forcing them to experience are actually affecting them. You should theoretically be able to achieve a similar level of incapacitation, granted with a shorter duration. And it only requires the initial effort from you to guide your chakra to the relevant brain regions.”

Sakura flushed under his praise. Was it any wonder she had fallen for him when he was so generous with his compliments, and so willing to recognize her ability? “Well, that’s the idea,” she said, trying to achieve the same calm mask he was able to slip on with so much ease. “I’m going to have to practice with chakra strings like puppet masters use to activate it from a distance.”

“Why not use a kunai?” Itachi suggested. “You can use a similar concept to exploding tags by attaching a seal to a kunai. I know you have developed seals to target specific parts of the body and specific sorts of injuries. That way, you could simply infuse the seal with your chakra to activate it and throw the kunai. When it comes close enough to the target, they should be drawn in to the illusion.”

“Oh wow, that’s a great idea! I really should have thought of that myself – wait,” Sakura said, her eyes narrowing in realization. “How did you know about the seals I developed? I’ve only taught you the diagnostic scan, and we’ve barely gotten started on interpreting your observations from running the diagnostic. We haven’t had a single conversation about my seal work.”

Itachi shrugged nonchalantly. “Your notes were rather detailed,” he replied.

Sakura was *pissed*. “You read my notes?” she screeched, her voice rising by about an octave. How dare he invade her privacy? More than that, how the hell had he opened her notebook? She’d checked it everyday, and the mechanisms she used to keep it sealed had not been disturbed. And her encryption – it had taken even Shikamaru ages to break it! How the hell had he managed to decipher it? Was it from the single page she’d shown him when she was trying to persuade him of her conclusions with regards to Obito?

And he wondered why she tried to maintain her privacy and hide things from him, she thought sourly. Really, he had it coming to him.

“Only the ones you recorded on your first night of captivity,” Itachi murmured. “I wanted to keep tabs on any possible escape attempts so I could turn them to my advantage.”

Oh. That made things slightly better, she supposed. Those notes were messier – she’d been more focused on pulling everything she could from her memory to ensure her knowledge wasn’t lost.

“You still had no right,” she grumbled. She’d destroyed that batch of notes after he’d retrieved her pack, which meant he’d managed to

break her encryption and read through the entire thing within the few short hours between her falling asleep and his departure. It stung her pride.

His eyes smouldered, and she felt a shiver run down her spine. He really must be drunk, she realized giddily. She'd realized along the way that he was attracted to her, but he'd never allowed any hint of it to leak out to this extent – not without provocation on the part of her or her personas, that was.

“I would never turn down an opportunity to have a glimpse of what goes on within your fascinating mind, Sakura,” he purred, and oh, the way his voice caressed her name was doing *things* to her, and she was so tempted to repeat her activities of that afternoon, but with the real Itachi this time.

Focus! She told herself. In any case, she wasn't in the habit of having sex with people who were too drunk to consent – unless they were targets whom she had to seduce for a mission, of course. She cleared her throat. “So, uh, anyway, I actually originally wanted to try that technique out on you, but you're not at the right state of mind to make that sort of decision, anyway. We can try it tomorrow!” she said, edging herself off the bed.

He gripped her arm, and pulled her onto his lap. She yelped ungracefully at the sudden movement. Maybe she should reconsider her earlier position. A demonstrative and affectionate Itachi was wonderful indeed.

“I assure you that I have complete faith in you. After all, you are the one who will be performing the jutsu, and *your* abilities are not compromised in any way,” he said coolly. He looked into her eyes, and if not for the feel of his chakra surge, she would not have realized that he'd pulled her into the genjutsu already – he'd chosen to set them in the exact location they'd been in, and the exact same position. She hadn't even had time to tell him the genjutsu wasn't necessary – it wasn't like she wanted to invade his privacy and see what he was experiencing once she activated the fear centre of his brain. She just needed to check how long the genjutsu kept him out of commission for.

Her own personas were betraying her, she thought grumpily. Inner hadn't even bothered to put up a token resistance, even though Sakura hadn't instructed her to let her guard down. *I'd better keep my eyes peeled for those two*, she realized. She wouldn't put it past them to try

to seduce Itachi again, and in his state, he'd certainly reciprocate. *Not that he needed alcohol to reciprocate last time either.*

She cracked her knuckles, and Itachi again closed his eyes, and turned away from her. "I'm ready," he said quietly.

"I don't think this is a good idea," she said, anxiety filling her again. "There's no way of knowing how it would interact with the alcohol in your system – "

He opened his eyes, and turned toward her, exasperated. "*Sakura*," he said. "How many times must I ask you to have faith in your own abilities?" His expression softened a little, and he went on. "It pains me to hear someone as skilled and intelligent as you continually question yourself."

She sighed. It seemed like there was no way out of this mess.

Chapter End Notes

Simple Definitions of Brain Parts

Visual cortex - the part of the brain that processes visual input (basically helps us understand what we're seeing)

Auditory cortex - the part of the brain that processes auditory input (basically helps us understand what we're hearing)

Somatosensory cortex - the part of the brain that processes touch, temperature, and pain-related input (basically helps us understand what we're touching and feeling)

Nucleus accumbens - a part of the brain that processes stuff like emotion, motivation, pleasure, and rewards.

Note that I have absolutely no idea if stimulating all these regions will actually lead to the effects Sakura experienced in this chapter - this is where the Dubious Science tag comes into play!

Also, we're officially into the third act - Reality Check. We had a breather in this chapter for some sexytimes, but things are going to get real angsty real fast.

The scene with Itachi drinking was inspired by Lady Silvamord's Bluebird! One of my top favourite ItaSaku fanfics.

Cruel Deeds of a Kind Child

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura had never before done anything so unethical in her entire time conducting medical research. Performing an experimental jutsu on someone whose judgement was clearly compromised by alcohol, and who hadn't had the risks explained to him was bad enough. And on top of that, she was in a position to experience his inner demons *together* with him.

As curious as she was, she didn't want to invade his privacy this way. If she ever came to know about the darkest parts of him, she wanted it to be because he had chosen to show them to her.

And yet... As he turned impatiently to regard her, she bit her lip with worry. She wasn't exactly in a position to refuse him either. He was so insistent, and he tended to perceive the smallest things as rejection. Try as he might to hide it, there was never any chance that she would miss the tense set of his shoulders, the false face of calm and ease, and the clipped tone of his voice, showing even less emotion than his usual subdued display.

After all, she'd spent her entire life being rejected. She could spot the signs far too easily.

She revised her plan. Instead of activating the fear centre of his brain, she decided to activate the disgust centre instead. Considering what a clean freak he was, he'd probably just see the way she left his room disorganized. Snickering to herself, she placed her hands on his neck and sent chakra pulses to the relevant parts of his brain.

And immediately regretted it.

They were surrounded by walls. It was dark, and the cobblestones were slick with what she initially assumed was rain.

And then, she heard the screams, and knew the wetness to be blood. She heard children screaming in terror at the nightmare turned flesh that turned on them and silenced them in a fell swoop. The scene flashed, and she saw the elderly and the infirm falling to his blade. Another flash, and he was cradling a girl in a way that made jealousy

rise up like bile in Sakura's throat. Jealousy turned to horror as she realised that he'd stabbed the girl he clearly loved.

Too close. Too close.

And then. And then.

A man, speaking in a voice filled with grief, "I don't want to fight a death match with my own son." That same man, and a woman – they were his parents, she realized – kneeling with their backs to him. A whisper from the man – "You truly are a kind child." *How cruel, how ironic*, Sakura thought, frozen, as she watched Itachi's back muscles ripple as his katana flashed and he slew his parents too. How many times had she admired those muscles, longed to run her hands along them? How many times had she fantasised about how that very back would flex as they made love?

Far too many, for the short time she'd known him. She'd allowed herself to be distracted by his kindness, his gentleness, allowed herself to forget exactly why Uchiha Itachi had been the most feared shinobi to emerge from Konoha since the likes of Uchiha Madara and Senju Hashirama.

And then, Sasuke. The boy she'd loved for years. She saw him, first as a terrified eight-year-old child, and then as a reckless thirteen-year-old boy. Both times, Itachi forced him to relive the slaughter. Both times, Itachi told an impressionable child, desperately trying to understand what was happening, that his hatred was not enough; that he needed to travel further down a path he could never return from.

Sakura felt numb and sick. Was it any wonder Sasuke had spurned her and left her behind? How laughable her entreaties to him had been! What was a foolish, weak girl begging him to stay for the sake of *happiness*, when he had a clan full of loved ones to avenge? What was a heart's brother demanding for him to come back to a home that held no love for him, when he had a traitorous blood brother's challenge to answer? What were promises that every day would be fun, when all his days were pointed towards a single end?

She'd thought she had understood, but she hadn't. Not really. Kakashi-sensei had briefly told her about the Tsukuyomi and its effects after that disastrous mission where they'd run into Sasuke in the worst possible way. He'd been trying to soothe her pain, to get her to understand that it was nothing personal, that Sasuke had been twisted by Itachi's genjutsu.

She'd nodded and pretended she'd gotten it, but there was no way she could comprehend the depths of his pain until now.

And... And... She was the most sickening one of all. She'd looked at Itachi, the author of all this suffering, and she'd really thought he was *great boyfriend material*.

And then, thankfully, the genjutsu ended, and they fell out of Itachi's genjutsu as well, and his eyes were widened in stark terror, and his face was whiter than she'd ever seen it. His grip on her slackened, his body curling into itself, turning away from her, almost becoming defensive. As if he was protecting himself from the weight of her judgement.

He was trembling.

Sakura struggled to reconcile what she'd just seen – the heartless murderer – with the terrified man before her now.

The disgust. It's directed towards himself, she realized. It was not disgust with the weakness of those who fell before him so easily, as she'd initially assumed without even realizing it.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. She'd already realized she knew far too little about the events of the Uchiha massacre. Now was not the time to begin jumping to conclusions. Not after she'd made him relive the entire thing.

And yet... His own parents. His brother. His girlfriend.

How could he?

Even if he was disgusted with himself for what he'd done, he'd still done it. They'd cried before him, shaking, they'd put their trust in him to protect them as the clan heir, and he'd still made the decision to go ahead and destroy all of it. What on earth could justify all of that?

Did it really matter why he'd done it? Or that he appeared to feel the repercussions of his actions? Did it matter that he attempted to set things right by spying on Akatsuki for Konoha? Did it matter that he now seemed determined to protect, even if it was only her?

No wonder he had no trouble promising to never turn his Sharingan against a Konoha nin, she thought bitterly. Everyone he would have used it against was either dead or had defected.

She looked back down at the almost pitiful figure laying before her. She sighed. Her feelings could wait. She'd deal with them later.

For now, no matter how horrifying his actions had been... She could not just make herself stop loving him. It hurt, and she felt like she'd been the same fool she'd sworn she would never be again, but she couldn't just stop. It was why she still had some vestige of feelings for Sasuke, despite everything that had happened between them, and all the hurt he'd inflicted on her.

Itachi had cared for her when she needed it, and now, she would do the same. She'd return to the question of whether he truly was a good man later.

She lifted his head onto her lap, and stroked his hair. "It's okay," she said softly, speaking as she would to her younger, more skittish patients. "I'm here. I'm here." She wished she could promise more, that she was there to stay, that she'd bring him home, but that slaughter, and all the pain he'd caused...

Slowly, eventually, his body relaxed out of the clench it had fallen into. Their eyes met, and he just looked so lost... So much like a child whose entire world had been upended.

They remained in that position for the rest of the night, even after Itachi's eyes had eventually closed and he'd fallen into a fitful slumber. He'd barely made a sound; yet Sakura knew he was having terrible nightmares. It was in the way his entire body had tensed and stiffened, over and over. It was in the way it had never fully relaxed.

Sakura maintained her vigil, and did not allow herself to rest. She did not deserve it. Not after she'd allowed herself to fall for a man who could do such terrible things and smile so gently at her. Not after she'd dug up the demons in his past and inflicted them on him again. Not after she'd thought activating his disgust centre would lead him to see something as mundane and innocent as *untidiness*, having forgotten the horrors that lay within his mind.

After he woke, as they were preparing to set out, Sakura quietly told him that she would remain as Brainwashed Sakura until they reached their first destination three days later. He nodded woodenly, and did not break his silence.

He probably took it as another rejection, she realized. But she needed the time and space to figure out if she could keep loving him, even though she knew at the bottom of her heart that there was no real

choice, not for her. She would need to learn to live with herself, knowing she loved a murderer, and that the simple fact of witnessing his murders was not enough to halt that love in its tracks. Brainwashed Sakura could hold the fort until then. Her love for him was unconditional, and she'd fallen for him while thinking he'd violated her in the worst possible way. She already had the answers Sakura was struggling to discover.

On the day they reached Kasaki, a major trading town near Kumo, Itachi was morose and withdrawn. More morose than he already had been, Sakura realized. He hadn't even taken charge of their travel arrangements – he'd allowed Konan to decide that they would all be staying at the same inn, not offering a single opinion or comment.

Had she done something? She'd thought that she was doing the right thing by keeping her distance. They had both needed the space, after all. But at that point, she was no longer so sure. She had to force herself to stay calm, to remind herself that she was done being that pathetic teenage girl who was so frightened of being left behind, and would have done anything to ensure that her loved ones would stay. Itachi had his own mood swings, she reminded herself. Not all his changes in mood could be due to her actions, or lack thereof.

Sakura's certainty that something was off only increased when Itachi ordered a bottle of sake to be sent up to their rooms. He'd paused only briefly to cast the room's protections before he sat at the low table in front of his futon and began pouring shots down his throat. He stopped after the third shot, and simply stared vacantly into space. He had not even bothered to ensure that she had food. Granted, Sakura *was* more than capable of calling for dinner to be sent up, but the fact that he had not hovered like a mother hen to ensure her needs were taken care of was just really out of character for him.

And then, Kisame opened the door. Another anomaly – Kisame had never once interrupted when Sakura and Itachi were alone together. Granted, it wasn't like there was much even going on for him to interrupt, but Sakura noted it anyway, along with the fact that Itachi appeared to trust him enough that he was allowed in through Itachi's protections. Kisame hadn't even needed to knock.

"Konan is projecting herself to the base using the ring. She's speaking with Leader-sama," Kisame informed Itachi quietly. "She's been doing it almost every night. She has long conversations with him, and she always sleeps like the dead afterward. You can carry on without

worrying, Itachi-san. Even if she musters up the energy to interfere, I'll make sure she stays far from you tonight." Itachi did not acknowledge Kisame's words, and the shark-nin did not seem to expect a reply either.

He turned to Sakura. "Take care of him," he said quietly. "This day is always diff- "

"Kisame," Itachi interrupted sharply. It was the first word she'd heard him speak since they'd entered the room. Kisame shot Itachi an apologetic glance, and exited.

The instant Kisame left, Itachi continued drinking shot after shot like a man on a mission, until the bottle was only a quarter full. Sakura simply watched him in stunned silence.

Eventually, her worry won out over her hesitance to speak with him after three days of silence. She sat on the floor, as near to him as she could get without actually joining him on the futon, and placed her hand on his arm. "Itachi?" she asked quietly.

He flinched at the contact. Sakura felt a surge of guilt.

"I... Is there anything I can help with?" she asked, feeling so fucking inadequate as she did.

He sighed heavily, and downed another shot. "No," he replied. And that was that.

Frustrated, Sakura grabbed the sake bottle. Itachi looked like he was about to protest, but Sakura lifted it to her lips and emptied it down her throat. If he wouldn't allow her to care for him, that was okay. She had experience dealing with stubborn, mule-headed idiots, her ex-sensei being one such, and her shishou being another. She'd just get herself shit-faced too and make the evening end more quickly. Kisame had made it sound like an anniversary of some sort, after all.

"Another one?" she asked, and he nodded.

Two bottles later, Sakura burst into tears. Somewhere along the way, she'd figured out that he was drinking because it was the anniversary of the massacre.

"It's not fair," she wept. Itachi simply looked at her, but the corner of Sakura's mind that still held onto some vestige of sobriety was glad

that he was at least displaying some interest. It was far better than the empty and expressionless mask he'd worn for the past three days.

"It was so horrible. They were crying and scared, and you killed them. And you hate yourself for it, don't you? I activated your disgust centre, and we saw all of that. I'm so sorry Itachi. I never wanted to invade your privacy like that. I was so stupid. I thought you'd just see a mess you'd want to clean or something. And I've been making so much fun of you for it... you're so particular about cleanliness because of that day, aren't you? Because you can never clean the blood you spilled that day. I'm such an idiot, Itachi. I'm so sorry you're stuck with me."

"It was horrible," he agreed. His words were slightly slurred, but apart from that, you'd never have known that he was inebriated. He hesitated, and then pulled her onto the futon, bringing her closer to him so that their foreheads were touching, his hands cupping her face. "But you are neither stupid nor an idiot. Never speak of yourself that way."

"I am," she sobbed. "I should hate you. I should be scared of you. But all I can think about is how sad and lost you looked when we came out of that genjutsu, and how much I want to make your pain go away."

He sighed again. "I wish you did hate me," he replied. "It would make things so much easier. But as it is... My pain will never go. It should not. I will carry the burden of my sins with me forever."

"You *had* to do it," she said with certainty. "They wouldn't have covered up so much otherwise."

He stared at her in shock. "Covered... Up?"

She nodded vehemently. "Yes. Shishou sent me your files. Your psych evals from ANBU were about as different as could be from the psychological profiles the investigators wrote. If I didn't know you, I would have thought there was bribery or corruption involved, to make you seem fit for duty when you weren't. Or maybe that you'd used genjutsu to trick the evaluators. But I do know you. And you've been so cold and so mean sometimes, but you've *never* been anything even nearing bloodthirsty. Nothing like Orochimaru. None of it made sense. They should have sent retrieval teams after you, should have dug deep to find out exactly what happened. But instead, they settled for an explanation which they should have known was wrong. So, the only

possible answer left was that the higher-ups were involved somehow. They were trying to pin it on you, make you seem like you were solely responsible. And they did their best to destroy any credibility you would have so you could never defend your actions.”

Itachi simply stared. His gaze flickered to the two empty bottles, back to Sakura. “You are remarkably coherent for someone who has consumed as much alcohol as you have,” he said finally.

Sakura felt a smirk form on her face. *He dodged the question. I was right!*

“Speak for yourself,” she retorted. “Honestly, how are you still so goddamned formal even after drinking? I was really hoping I would have heard you curse at least *once*.”

“You will never hear me speak with anything less than courtesy,” Itachi promised, and Sakura flushed at the memory of how her illusory Itachi had spoken to her. It had only been a few days, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

She shook her head violently, attempting to dislodge the thoughts. “Let’s get another bottle.”

They remained on Itachi’s futon, passing the bottle between them. Sakura had given up on balancing herself, and leaned heavily against Itachi. Itachi, for his part, had stopped moving away each time Sakura drew closer to him. He’d also stopped bothering with pouring the alcohol into glasses, drinking straight from the bottle as Sakura did.

“Tell me about Sasuke?” Itachi suddenly asked.

Sakura snorted. “He’s an asshole,” she said. And then, seeing the look on Itachi’s face, she added on, “But he was *our* asshole.” A pause. “You really care about him.”

Itachi remained silent. Sneaking a glance at him, she noticed the tense set to his jaw. “It’s okay,” she sighed. “I’m not digging for information or anything. I know enough, anyway. But if you want me to tell you good things about Sasuke... I just can’t. I’m sorry. The last time I saw him... well. It was pretty brutal.”

“I would hear about it anyway,” Itachi replied, sounding resigned.

She opened her mouth, and closed it again. She then pulled the bottle

from Itachi, and drank the rest of it – a little less than half of it remained at that point – in one gulp. She set it aside.

“This happened a year ago,” she recounted. “Kakashi-sensei, Hyuuga Neji, and I were assigned to an escort mission. The man was an extremely important advisor to the Fire Daimyo, and had also been ambushed many times by unknown aggressors. He was among the faction that pushed for greater peace, and for nations to stop relying so heavily on shinobi villages. Tsunade-shishou approved, since he was negotiating for international regulation against allowing children below the age of 12 to become shinobi, and she wanted him to have the best possible protection detail. So she sent a wielder of the Sharingan, a wielder of the Byakugan, and her own apprentice.”

She paused, hoping her voice wouldn’t shake. “Well, I guess Orochimaru was opposed to the advisor’s political position, because he sent a team of his own to eliminate the man. And... Sasuke was part of that team.”

Kami, this was the worst part. She’d alternated between trying to force herself to process the feelings of betrayal and shame, and pushing it to a dark corner of her mind where it would never again see the light of day. Why on earth had she even decided to tell Itachi about it anyway? She hadn’t even told *Ino*. Kakashi-sensei and Neji were the only ones who knew, and that was because they’d been there.

“I was standing in front of our charge, and I was protecting him. I guess Sasuke thought I would be an easy target, and I suppose he got frustrated when he realized that I was more than capable of blocking him. And the entire time, I was begging him to just reconsider. I told him it wasn’t too late for him to come home...”

At that, her voice cracked. She wanted to stop so badly. But she could feel Itachi’s dark eyes boring into her, demanding the truth. And so, she continued through her hiccups and sobs.

“I thought I’d gotten through to him,” she managed to get out through her sobs. “He suddenly stopped, and just *looked* at me. And then, I was in his genjutsu. It was such a weak one – I could have dispelled it so easily, if I’d only had the sense that even first-years at the Academy do. But since I didn’t... Well.” She took a breath, attempting to calm herself. She looked away from Itachi, away from those eyes that noticed everything, and looked at the walls, the ceiling, her hands knotted in her lap, just anywhere other than his eyes.

She reached for his necklace that she still wore, pressing the centre circle between her thumb and index finger, attempting to find some comfort from the symbol of his protectiveness over her. “He, he – “ she began, and then her voice quavered, and she could feel her eyes stinging, and the tears dripping down her cheeks *again*. She was such a child.

And an ugly crier too, she thought as she felt her nose become clogged up with snot.

“I’m sorry,” she choked out. “I’ve tried so hard to talk about it for so long, but I’ve just never been able to. Kakashi-sensei had to include it in my mission report for me because I just couldn’t bring myself to even write it out, knowing shishou would see what a stupid little fool I was.”

Itachi did not say a word. Instead, his arms enfolded her, and he drew her into an embrace. He stroked her hair and held her as she wept. When her sobs finally quietened, he spoke.

“Sakura. Nothing can change the way I see you. Nothing,” he vowed, and it sounded as if he meant more than just the way he perceived her. She pushed down the giddy hope rising within her. *Sasuke never gave a fuck about you. What makes you think Itachi would? Pitiful, ugly little thing that you are – why would he?*

She froze. She had not thought of herself that way in months. Self-flagellation was nothing new for Sakura, but the intensity with which that sense of loathing returned almost frightened her. At that moment, Itachi could have been the heartless, bloodthirsty, cruel murderer that a part of her still feared he was, and she still would have despised herself more than him.

I have to get past this. It’s been a year. I can’t let this keep holding me back.

“I was in his genjutsu,” she repeated. “He told me I was right, and there was nothing he regretted more than leaving Konoha. Leaving me. And then, he kissed me. And that’s when he broke the genjutsu, and he killed my charge. And he stabbed me through my stomach to get to him. I felt the Daimyo’s advisor die instantly underneath me, and I would have died too, if I hadn’t been capable of healing myself, and if I hadn’t been wearing one of the experimental healing seals I’d made.”

Itachi’s arms tightened around her, as the sobs wracked her body

again. “I loved him so much, and he lied to me, tricked me, and *stabbed* me,” she cried. “The same Sasuke who once jumped in front of me to take senbon for me. The same Sasuke who almost killed somebody who beat me up during the chuunin exams.”

She laughed bitterly. “I guess Uchiha just have a habit of stabbing me, huh?”

Suddenly, the anger and resentment she’d buried so deep she hadn’t realized it existing came surging up within her, and she pummelled Itachi’s chest with her fists. She refrained from using chakra, though. She loved him, and as angry as she was with him, she would not actually hurt him.

“It’s all your fault,” she wept, finally giving voice to the feelings that had been swirling within her since she witnessed his memories. “You probably felt like you had no choice but to kill them. But why did you have to torture Sasuke? He was just in Shukuba Town because he wanted to protect Naruto from being hunted. And you ruined it, you twisted his feelings of love and protectiveness and turned him into a monster who would kill his own friends without remorse. It’s all your fault!”

Having said her piece, Sakura felt the rage and resentment seep out of her as quickly as they’d emerged. She sagged, burying her face in Itachi’s chest, taking comfort from his solid strength, even as part of her still whispered to get as far from him as she could.

He sighed, and tucked her head under his chin, and slowly rubbed circles into her back. After a few minutes, Sakura almost thought she could feel wetness hitting her scalp. So softly that she thought she’d imagined it, he whispered, “I’m sorry,” in a voice that cracked as much as hers had just a few minutes earlier.

And they remained locked in the embrace for the rest of the night, eventually falling asleep in a pile of tangled limbs. So consumed were they by their thoughts, their emotions, and each other, that neither of them noticed a paper butterfly which had managed to sneak its way in to the room through a gap in the protections that Itachi had accidentally left. The butterfly circled them a few times before it left as silently as it had arrived, its targets none the wiser.

Chapter End Notes

Angst, as promised! And this isn't the end of it either :)

I'm so glad we finally reached this part! The scene at the end with Sakura confronting Itachi and both of them releasing their emotions together was one of the first scenes I envisioned when I first started plotting this fic, and it feels like such a milestone to have finally reached it!

A Matter of Thought

Chapter Notes

This chapter was honestly one of the hardest ones I've had to write so far, because it's a pretty transitional one - I'm trying to finish setting everything up for what's coming up, while dealing with the emotional hangover from the previous one. I'm not entirely happy with it, but it's finished and that's what matters. Now, I can at least focus on the next chapter, which I am WAYYYYYYY more excited to write!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“When were you going to tell me that Sakura was captured by the Akatsuki?” Sasuke-kun demanded.

A smirk grew on Orochimaru’s face. “Why, Sasuke-kun, whatever gave you *that* idea?” Yes, this was going very nicely indeed. Kabuto, that excellent instrument, had done his job well in planting the seeds that allowed Sasuke-kun to discover the information for himself.

“I heard your intelligence agents reporting in to Kabuto, so don’t bullshit me!” Sasuke-kun shouted. Ah, how delicious his temper was. The boy wore his emotions on his sleeve, and it made him much easier to manipulate than his older brother.

“Ahhhhh,” Orochimaru hissed. “They are in for a chastisement, then. Kabuto as well. In any case, Sasuke-kun, you would hardly have expected me to think you were interested, yes? After all, you left the girl for dead. One would think you could not care less what happened to her. *Or do you?*”

Sasuke-kun made a pitiful attempt at a poker face. Really, the boy was nowhere *near* his brother’s level. “You know as well as I do that Itachi is part of the Akatsuki!” he said furiously. “I could track Sakura, use her to lead me – “

“Right into the Akatsuki stronghold? And then what, Sasuke-kun?” Orochimaru purred. He’d enjoyed indulging the boy, especially since it had kept him weak and pliant to his manipulations. But he had to admit that he was just slightly disappointed by just how little the boy had developed his mind, focusing on ninjutsu and kenjutsu to the exclusion of all the other skills required to be an elite shinobi. Tactics,

strategy, emotional control, critical thinking – all of them remained at the same level that they had been at when Sasuke-kun had first come to him five years ago. Orochimaru had not cared, of course – the arrangement suited him well enough, given that it would be *his* mind that eventually inhabited Sasuke-kun's body.

Still, he had to reel the boy in. And for that, he needed him to understand, at least a little. Enough so that he would see things Orochimaru's way.

"Let me explain the situation to you, Sasuke-kun," Orochimaru said sibilantly. "The Third Hokage gave his life to defeat me. Itachi and I battled once, around nine years ago. He defeated me easily. Now, taking me as a benchmark, it would mean Itachi's strength is greater than that of the Third Hokage's, yes?"

Sasuke-kun nodded reluctantly, not realizing the various holes in Orochimaru's argument. "And, Sasuke-kun, how close have you *ever* come to defeating me when we have sparred?"

The boy's silence spoke volumes. Good. Now to go for the kill.

"Perhaps, Sasuke-kun, it is time for you to acknowledge that you will never reach Itachi's level. If you have not managed it in the past five years, another fifty will make little difference. The only way for you to gain your vengeance may be to request me to carry it out *for* you. I will leave you to think on it, Sasuke-kun," Orochimaru hissed, and turned and left.

Now the boy would be in a state of mental confusion and upset. He would instruct Kabuto to prepare the transference ritual and begin it the next day, Orochimaru decided. There was no point in waiting – not when waiting might undo all of his hard work in bringing Sasuke-kun to the exact point he needed him to be at.

Itachi had not spent much time in his life wondering what came after death. For there to be anything that allowed consciousness to continue existing past the expiry of its shell, a higher power would need to exist, and Itachi doubted any such did.

After all, no deity would have forced Itachi to the point where he had to kill everyone whom he had grown up believing he would protect. No benevolent god would have allowed Itachi to succeed, and to keep on living when nearly everyone he had ever cared about was dead by his own hands.

But now, curled up on his futon, entangled with Sakura and enveloped by the scent of rosemary, mint, and sage, he wondered again. It would take a higher power to dangle a temptation so precisely crafted to his preferences in front of him. She was everything he wanted, and she fit so perfectly in his arms. And Itachi already knew that if there was consciousness after death, he would spend an eternity burning for what he had already done.

And yet, somehow, what his body was begging him for seemed a much greater crime in the moment than all his previous ones.

Their bodies were entwined so that he could hardly tell where he ended and where Sakura begin. He'd been unable to resist the temptation to fall asleep with her in his arms, even despite his numerous thoughts that he needed to bring her over to her own futon.

And somehow, in the middle of the night, they'd moved so that she was holding his head to her chest, his face buried between her breasts. It was a divine feeling, simultaneously comforting and arousing, and he could hardly bring himself to be embarrassed by his arousal poking into her thigh. He wanted to stay in that position forever.

Just one caress, a part of him begged. Just one touch. Just one taste. She wants it too, you know it. You could give her a gift of waking up to you giving her exactly what she wants and more.

He should not. He should not covet her. There was still hope. He was certain that her attraction was at this point still mostly physical, driven by his resemblance to his brother. So long as Itachi did not act on his own inappropriate desires, she could still return to Sasuke.

With a groan, he forced himself out of the warmth of their embrace, careful not to jostle her too much. She was not for him. He could reach out and take her, but he would in the process irreparably destroy her. There were mitigating factors for all his other sins, but this one, he knew, could never be forgiven.

A cold shower was what he needed. It would help him get some needed distance.

Sasuke stared at the remains of what had, just minutes earlier, been his master, and he shuddered at how unacceptably close he had come to failure. Orochimaru was a master manipulator, and Sasuke had been so focused on Orochimaru's skills in ninjutsu that he'd allowed himself to forget that any missing-nin needed to be highly cunning in

addition to their physical abilities to be able to not just survive, but to thrive, in such a situation.

Unconscionably, it was one of *Itachi's* teachings that had led him to the realization that he was being played. Sasuke could have been whining about anything – a teacher who had scolded him, a classmate who had irritated him, his own father ignoring him – and Itachi would immediately respond with a “Foolish little brother. You must learn to look underneath the underneath.”

Although he had been surprised when Kakashi had first used the same words, he'd eventually realized from various things Kakashi had let slip that he'd been Itachi's first captain and his mentor in ANBU. Every time Kakashi had said those words, he had felt molten hatred and anger coursing through his body. Every time Kakashi had said those words, it had brought back to him the memories of Itachi patiently coaching him through understanding what motivated others, and how those motivations led to their behaviours. He had avoided that entire thought process for that reason – the memories of Itachi as his gentle and loving older brother still hurt.

And yet, when he'd sat down to think about Orochimaru's veiled threat, he'd gone through that process anyway. Regardless of where the tool came from, he had to set aside his distaste to be able to out-think Orochimaru. And as much as he despised Itachi and everything he stood for, Sasuke could not deny that the man was a genius.

Orochimaru had been amused by his quest for vengeance, yes, but he had never shown any kind of interest in it. Sasuke had then concluded that Orochimaru must have been up to something, to suddenly bring it up. And for Sasuke to have been able to overhear Kabuto was strange too. The older nin was far wiler and far more cautious than Sasuke. So for him to let information slip in that way, when Sasuke hadn't even been trying to snoop...

And then, he'd realized it. All along, Orochimaru had made no secret of the fact that he eventually wished to possess Sasuke's body. Almost three years ago, Sasuke had managed to put Orochimaru off to gain more time to train and match up to Itachi. Now, however, his time was up. He had to either surrender and give up all hope of enacting his vengeance himself, or attempt to fight his way out.

There was no real choice, of course. Not fighting would not cede him any advantages whatsoever. He could not count on Orochimaru to carry out his vengeance even if the snake nin was feeling kindly –

Orochimaru valued his life above all else, and if he truly had been defeated easily by Itachi, he would not risk another encounter. It was all on Sasuke.

He would simply have to do his best, and make his own way out of the trap.

And somehow, by some miracle, he'd *won*. He lived to fight another day, and now, Itachi would get what was coming to him. He would pay – not just for what he had done to the Uchiha clan, not just for how he had betrayed Sasuke, but also for the role he played in Sakura's capture.

Sasuke ignored the niggling voice at the back of his mind which reminded him of his own guilt – that he had hurt Sakura terribly as well. That was in the past, and she should not have stood in his way.

Even now, he acknowledged the reality. Much as he cared for Sakura, and how he appreciated the level of concern and care she displayed for him, killing Itachi was far more important. If he could, he would save her, but he might not be able to, he knew. The report he had heard Kabuto receive indicated that Sakura was being held at Akatsuki's headquarters. While Itachi would certainly be able to leave so that he could be killed by Sasuke, Sakura would not have any such liberties.

He paused in his wool-gathering. First things first. There was plenty of time for thought later. He needed to secure Orochimaru's papers, as there was plenty in there which could be useful to him. He also needed a team that could back him up and aid him in finding Itachi.

They were being watched.

Itachi forced himself to remain relaxed. After all, the whole point of this plan was for their presence to be noticed, and for Akatsuki to flaunt that they had Sakura under their control. It was his plan, and it was a good one – it would be effective in drawing Sasuke to him, while appearing to be effective in baiting Naruto.

That didn't mean Itachi had to like it. Especially since whoever it was he sensed was far away enough that they'd allowed themselves to be detected by him on purpose.

He forced the scowl from his face as Brainwashed Sakura chattered away happily with the shopkeeper, browsing the wares in the market

stall. The Land of Lightning made beautiful ornamental lights, and she enjoyed looking at them. He had to admit that he did as well. He was almost contemplating purchasing a dove with an olive branch in its beak, with the leaves on the branch containing the lights. It was a beautiful piece, and he felt as if it just suited Sakura somehow.

He winced as he thought again of how he'd allowed his alcohol consumption to compromise his judgement, how he'd pulled Sakura even more closely to him when he should have maintained the distance between them. She had witnessed the horrors of his past, and she had comforted him and watched over him as he suffered through nightmares instead of pulling away from him. She recognized that her suffering was his fault, and she'd still clung to him with desperation the night before.

She cared.

The realization was simultaneously the most exhilarating and the most terrifying thing he'd ever felt. As instinctually as he'd reacted when she'd viewed his memories, cringing away from her inevitable scorn; as comforted as he'd felt when she had shifted his head onto her lap and stroked his hair, he couldn't deny that part of him had *wished* for her hatred. It would have made things so much easier.

And now, he also had to deal with the disquieting knowledge that she had figured out too much. He'd underestimated her yet again. He'd only thought of his own desire to send intelligence to his home when he'd told her she could open communications with Konoha. He had far downplayed the probability that she would receive useful intelligence *back*. And she'd managed to get access to documents as confidential as his ANBU intake paperwork – there was absolutely no way that he could have predicted that she would have such a high security clearance. A mark of Tsunade's favour and trust, he assumed. He supposed he should count himself fortunate that Danzō was far too canny to leave evidence as obvious as mission orders where it could be inconveniently found.

He tried to forget his thoughts of that morning, and how a cold shower had not been enough to help him deal with his situation, and how he'd had to resort to fantasizing about her to address his condition.

He also avoided thinking about the sheer awkwardness that had suffused their extremely polite interactions that morning, or how tempted he was to just come clean to her about everything. She knew

so much already, and it would be so freeing to tell just one person everything before he died. His own little rebellion against his fate.

“I’m going to get this one,” Brainwashed Sakura said, interrupting his train of thought. He looked down at the ornament she was holding – it was another bird. Only this one was...

“Are you certain?” he asked. “A black light would not provide much illumination.”

“Perhaps not,” she said, looking at the crow-shaped ornament with what could only be called affection. “But it seems appropriate, somehow, for how my life has been so much brighter since I met you. I just wish I could give that same amount of light back.”

“You already have,” he whispered, hands cupping her face, his resolve and self-control crumbling once more. He’d essentially told her he loved another woman more than her, and she still cared so much. He barely cared that this was not his Sakura. The warmth in her eyes and her voice reached into a part of him he had previously thought would never see the light of day again, and melted the ice surrounding his heart. Like this, it was too tempting to just give in. To give up on his plans for Sasuke, to return to Konoha, and to hand over the mission scroll the Third Hokage had insisted he take with him in case he ever needed a safe harbour, to prove that he had only been acting on orders.

And then, he felt another presence join the one who had already been watching them. It troubled him. He’d spotted no sign of Konan watching them, which was only added to his unease.

Sakura, too, glanced around uneasily. Her fingers twitched upward, in a gesture he recognized. She’d dropped the Brainwashed Sakura persona, and she was resisting the almost instinctive urge to massage her forehead.

Itachi cursed inwardly. Due to Kasaki’s layout, this meant that there was only one path out of the town that was ostensibly free from being watched. Undoubtedly, they were being herded. He had not expected a confrontation at least until they had visited three more towns. Did news really spread that fast through Kumo? Or had they just been so unlucky to be so quickly spotted? How would Sasuke know to come for him and Sakura if all the Hidden Villages reacted this quickly to seeing Sakura with him?

Sakura hurriedly finished paying for the trinket, and nodded to him.

Did she really want that ornament, even as her own self? It was a thought to pursue later. When they were not being baited into what would undoubtedly be an ambush.

“We will wait them out, and in the meantime, we will prepare for a fight,” Itachi said decisively, as he explained the situation and the plan to Konan and Kisame. Sakura was currently resting in their rooms – he’d told her to remain there so that she would not have to go through the pain that came with switching personas yet again.

Konan frowned. “Do you not think it necessary to retreat to a more defensible position? This inn would be easily compromised.”

Itachi shook his head. “Kasaki is their turf. I am fairly certain that this is a squadron of Kumo nin – they would not have known to find us this quickly otherwise. They would not risk displeasing the Lightning Daimyo by allowing civilians to be harmed. If we wait, they will grow tired, and it will be easier for us to slip past them.”

“If we wait, they will also have time to call for reinforcements. They will also have time to evacuate the civilians if they are so concerned about them!” Konan snarled. “We must take the fight to them before we are outnumbered.”

“We have no way of knowing that we are not already outnumbered. For all we know, they may have multiple ambushes waiting,” Itachi retorted. “Konan-san, you may think you know better in all things, but I am still the lead on this mission. If you truly disagree with my leadership, you may go ahead and leave. I care little for whether you stay or not.”

He then turned to Kisame. “Well?” he asked brusquely, trying to avoid seeming as if he was already certain of Kisame’s support. “Do you have any objections to my decision you would like to voice as well?”

Kisame shrugged. “Either way, we get a fight, and Samehada gets to feast. That’s all that matters to me.”

Konan’s eyes narrowed at that, for some reason. What on earth had she managed to take issue with now? Kisame’s statement had been as neutral as it could get. Frustrated, Itachi stood and left without a word. They would need to stay indoors for the rest of the day to benefit from the shield the civilians would provide, but he could certainly spend it in far better company than Konan’s.

When Itachi returned to their rooms, he found Sakura preparing seals.

“Oh good, you’re back,” she said, looking up at him. “This will go much faster with you to help me.” She passed him one of the seals. “Copy that out *exactly*. It’s a healing seal, so even a single mistake in the proportions or a smudge could make someone bleed out instead of sealing their wounds.”

He activated his Sharingan and regarded her. “I am capable of that, yes,” he said dryly.

Her cheeks flushed, but her expression remained the same. “You’d be surprised,” she muttered. “Kakashi-sensei was pretty skilled with the Sharingan, but he was absolutely useless at doing any kind of sealing work.”

Itachi began working on copying out the seal. She had been right to be worried, he realized. It was highly complex. He frowned as he regarded it. He could recognize the sign for containment and another one for healing, but he could not recognize the rest.

“What’s this?” he asked, pointing to the centre portion which appeared to be the main part of the seal. It was a four-point star, with additional inscriptions at two of the points.

“Hmmm? Oh, this one is based off the basic seal to take readings. I added modifiers to specify that it should read a body’s health, and conduct triage as to the most urgent and critical injuries to tend to. Without it, the seal would attempt to heal all the injuries at the same rate, which is hardly useful. I mean, what would be the point of having a scrape on your leg close up when you’re bleeding out from a head wound?”

Itachi nodded in fascination, glad to continue asking her to share her expertise. Not only was he already interested in discovering just how far her knowledge went, but it was also better than returning to either the overly polite interaction or their far too affectionate way of being with one another.

Neither of us are very good at finding a balance, he thought resignedly.

“How would you work in your discoveries from your earlier experiment? The one with the blood?” he asked.

She shook her head absently. “That one won’t work here. Not when I’ve already got specifiers for who the seal should take effect on –

basically, whoever it's used on. Adding my blood would just confuse the instructions by making the seal try to heal both myself and whoever it's used on," she explained.

"Then what would you use it for?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Honestly? Nothing involving medicine or healing. First, all my healing seals are designed to use a person's own chakra to heal them, so that I don't need to worry about adding instructions to match chakra resonances. Using my blood would mean needing to add that. There's also too much risk of the instructions becoming jumbled up. It's not just about what's included in forming the seal – placing the elements in the right order and location also matters, and I haven't done near enough experimentation to add blood as an intensifier to a healing seal. That experiment was honestly just a side question, an academic curiosity I never thought I'd actually explore until I was cut off from all my usual equipment."

"But can't you think of anything at all?" he pressed. He wanted to see her mind in action, to understand if she was the sort of person who might think of wild ideas under pressure, or if she was more conservative in her approach.

She frowned, setting aside a completed seal. "Well, I guess if I was low on chakra, I would use my own blood to draw out the seal. But I wouldn't want to risk it if there was any other option."

Conservative, then. Itachi thoughtfully filed away that fact before returning his attention to the seal. "What about this one?" he asked, pointing to one that looked like a wave with a diagonal slash through it.

"That's an additional instruction to take into account the levels of chakra left," she explained. "If the seal continues to pull chakra to heal even after the shinobi has no chakra left, it'll start draining the chakra they need to sustain their life force and they'll surely die. It's less of a risk to stop the healing entirely."

Itachi had to admit that he was impressed with the number of considerations she'd put into designing the seal. "This was what you used on yourself when... you encountered Sasuke?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded; her face carefully blank. "It didn't have the instruction on chakra levels then," she replied. "I almost died of chakra depletion. Thankfully, Neji was monitoring me with his Byakugan and realized

what was happening, and Kakashi-sensei managed to deactivate the seal.”

He decided to change the subject from what must still be a painful topic for her. After all, she’d been incredibly understanding about not asking him about his Sharingan. He knew he would not be able to bear the guilt of refusing any information to her – not when she’d so willingly given of herself and her deepest secrets. But thinking of how he’d failed Shisui and his sacrifice still felt like a stab to his heart.

“How did you even discover all these?” he asked with amazement. “I thought most knowledge on seals was lost with the destruction of Uzushioakure.”

“It was,” she replied. “But Naruto’s mother was an Uzumaki, and she passed on most of her knowledge to the Fourth. Shishou’s grandmother was an Uzumaki too. Their notes gave me quite a few pieces of the puzzle. And well, being an Uzumaki, Naruto has an innate understanding of seals too, though he can’t always put it into words or think about how to actually apply them. But talking things over with him and Jiraiya-sama does help me deconstruct existing standard seals. Like the instruction for the seal to deactivate once the flow of chakra to it stops – we actually only know about it because it’s a part of the seal that kunoichi use to stop their cycles, and it would have been impossible to isolate that instruction from the rest of the seal elements without his help.”

The whole thing was ingenious, Itachi had to admit. He’d been more right than he could have known when he’d first taken her under his protection, and he’d deduced that she was highly resourceful and capable indeed.

They continued working in silence, each focusing on drawing seals. As they did, Itachi could not resist peeking at the ways her brows furrowed and her lips pursed up in concentration. He tried not to think about just how kissable she looked. As he averted his gaze, he glanced at his necklace around her delicate throat once again, and felt a sense of despair at just how *right* it looked.

In another world where he could have stayed in Konoha with his clan intact, he would have proposed, he knew. There was no way he would have let this intelligent and powerful woman slip through his hands. She would have worn the necklace as his wife, rather than as an act. He could almost wonder what sort of necklace she would have gifted him for their wedding. Even now, a traitorous part of him whispered

that he could still do it. Could act on his idea that he'd had earlier in the day, and return to Konoha with her.

And then, a whisper echoed through his mind. Kakashi-senpai's words, whispered time and again during Itachi's time under his captaincy. "Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum."

To give in to his feelings for Sakura now would be to abandon what he'd started, to consign Sasuke to a life as a missing-nin. Even if they managed to cover up the truth behind the massacre, if Sasuke found out that Konoha had pardoned him, he would never return home. He could not do that to his brother. Sakura had pointed out how Itachi had broken him twice already, and he could not complete his betrayal by damaging him for a third time.

He was imprisoned to his fate. He had no choice but to follow his course to the end.

Chapter End Notes

So for anyone who's wondering, Kakashi screwed up seals on purpose because working with them reminded him too much of Minato and Kushina, and it hurt him. But I couldn't really find a way to work that in without disrupting the flow of Itachi and Sakura's conversation, and ultimately, their intellectual bonding is more important to the story than Kakashi's trauma and his ability (or lack thereof) to cope with it!

Springing the Trap

Chapter Notes

For those of you who like this sort of thing, here's the playlist I made for this fic. It gives me so much feels to listen to it while writing this fic!

[https://youtube.com/playlist?](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLCGKut9dHmCZsy7N7ccE3Oo1LxK9VY2jv)

[list = PLCGKut9dHmCZsy7N7ccE3Oo1LxK9VY2jv](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLCGKut9dHmCZsy7N7ccE3Oo1LxK9VY2jv)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Konan forced her face to impassiveness as she met Itachi's gaze. She'd guessed his game. All this had been set up by him all along. Choosing to come to Kumo, where he'd probably already instructed his agents to meet him. Delaying their departure with the excuse of a waiting ambush, so that he would be able to conclude the rendezvous he was undoubtedly waiting for. Honestly. What sort of ninja would simply get tired of waiting and slink away from their target? Did Itachi truly expect her to accept such flimsy reasoning?

And sending out those crows of his, ostensibly searching for a safe path. When they were undoubtedly keeping an eye out for his agents. She'd sent her butterflies out along with them, and the ninja she'd detected had all been of low ability – not worth delaying their departure for.

It also rankled that yet again, he had been multiple steps ahead of her. She'd already known that she needed to be suspicious of him and whatever plans he was hatching together with Madara, yet the depths to which the corruption permeated within Akatsuki had previously remained unknown to her. To think that *Kisame*, whom she'd always previously trusted to keep to the organization's goals, had become one of Madara's? And to think that she would never have realized it had she not had the presence of mind to keep a butterfly outside Itachi's rooms, allowing her to spot him walking in as if none of Itachi's traps and protections existed.

Worse still was the kunoichi. Konan felt her hackles rise as she thought of her. That had to be her greatest failure in protecting Nagato. She'd fallen for the kunoichi's act – a pretty, innocent, face. She'd believed that surely, the kunoichi only behaved as she did because she was being controlled by Itachi.

Konan had been horrified when she'd managed to squeeze her butterfly through a gap in Itachi's protections, and she'd spotted how they behaved with one another when they thought nobody observed them. How the kunoichi had dropped all pretenses of submissiveness, addressing Itachi by *name* instead of calling him husband as she did in front of others. How she'd beaten him with her fists, and how Itachi had *allowed* it. And how they'd clung to each other.

The kunoichi was no more broken than Konan herself was. And yet, her loyalty was still to Itachi, and it was a loyalty that could not be easily broken. Konan knew that now. She had no hope of sabotaging their plans by driving a wedge between them. And the kind of bond that appeared to exist between them was not one that could have sprung up in the short time the kunoichi had been Itachi's captive. No, this entire thing had been planned for far longer than she'd thought possible.

"We will move on today," she said in a clipped voice. "I have reported in to Leader-sama, and he agrees with my assessment that it is futile to continue delaying, and staying in one spot for an ambush that may or may not happen. Allowing a few random ninjas to stall us for longer than a day would be sheer ridiculousness. We will spring the trap. We are both certain that a shinobi of your multiple accomplishments should not have any trouble handling a few troublesome village nin."

Itachi simply regarded her with his usual expressionless face that she now knew for a mask. He'd been perfectly capable of showing his feelings when he'd been alone with the kunoichi. "I trust you will not take offence at my wish to confirm this personally with Leader-sama?" he asked.

If Konan thought unleashing her paper daggers on him at that moment would accomplish anything apart from wasting her chakra, she would have. Not take offence, indeed. When he was blatantly accusing her of lying.

"I care little for what you do. Just make sure we are ready to leave within the day. I do not wish to cause further delays," she bit off.

Kakashi sat in a little hut in Mount Myōboku and contemplated on his failures, as he watched Naruto fail over and over again. The young shinobi was (unsuccessfully) attempting to recreate his father's signature technique, the Flying Thunder God jutsu. Even with his innate ability to understand what the functions of different seal

elements were and how to stitch them together in a way to avoid disaster, Naruto still had trouble creating a seal that would work for him. Seal work required both patience and the ability to understand the theoretical aspects of chakra, both of which were not Naruto's forte.

Still, he tried. It was a pity that the Flying Thunder God jutsu was not one that could be replicated simply by copying out the seal, as the seal required some level of personalization to be able to transport the user. And given that Naruto had not only himself, but also the bijuu sealed within him to consider, it took quite some effort.

And still, the boy continued to try, even though his efforts appeared to be futile. Ever since Tsunade-sama had briefed them that Sakura had been taken, and that he was forbidden from directly assisting in the rescue, Naruto had diverted his attentions to training. If mastering the Flying Thunder God jutsu would provide Sakura with an additional contingency to get home safely, then Naruto would die before he allowed himself to give up.

I'm sorry, Naruto, Kakashi thought silently. It was his own failures, after all, that had made this necessary.

Having failed to protect his sensei and his teammates, not to mention his sensei's beloved wife, Kakashi had devoted himself to protecting his genin, who reminded him so much of the ones he'd lost, in the only way he knew how: by setting them up for failure.

If Sasuke never became proficient with the Sharingan, never managed to unlock the Mangekyō, Itachi would have no reason to kill the boy. And so, Kakashi had trained him only when he was forced to by virtue of Sasuke's scheduled fight against Gaara, whom he saw for himself had a bloodlust that could not be quelled. He'd predicted that if Sasuke knew he was no match for Itachi, he'd stay in the village. He wouldn't be tempted down a dark path the way his older brother had been. Kakashi had made the mistake of helping Itachi cultivate his strength when under his mentorship – he would not repeat that with Sasuke.

Kakashi had failed – he'd underestimated the depth of Sasuke's hatred for his brother.

If Naruto remained a loudmouth whom nobody would take seriously, he would never become Hokage, never need to go on dangerous missions in service of his village. Never need to be mercilessly used in

the way the village used its jinchuriki. The village would never have let him retire from life as a shinobi, and Naruto himself would never even contemplate it. And so, he'd taught Naruto the barest minimum possible, only what he needed to know to stay alive on C-rank missions. He'd even asked Ebisu to tutor Naruto before the chuunin exams, knowing that Naruto would not learn too much from him.

Kakashi had failed there too – he had never expected Jiraiya to take the boy under his wing, and he had failed to consider that danger would come looking for Naruto.

If Sakura remained a weak fangirl who considered her looks before she considered her abilities, perhaps she would not even remain as a kunoichi. She could find a husband and retire to a peaceful life as a wife and mother. He'd had high hopes of this happening – after all, her introduction on the very first day he'd met his team had shown him how her goals centered around Sasuke.

Kakashi had failed there as well. He'd missed the depth of her love for her precious people, and how that would drive her to become stronger.

And now, he was left regretting the choices he'd made, wishing he'd trained her and nurtured her strengths as she deserved. Perhaps then, she could have outrun or outfought the Akatsuki, and he would not be left in the realm of the toads, waiting for someone else to carry out the rescue operation.

“Conserve your energy, Naruto,” he said, pretending to be absorbed in the little book he had carried around for years. “You may be called upon to reverse summon the squads from Kumo at any moment.” Even Naruto had a role to play in Sakura's rescue. He, on the other hand, was simply there to make sure Naruto did not disobey orders and do anything reckless. As if he'd ever been able to control anything Naruto did.

“Ah, you worry too much, Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto replied cheerfully. “Kurama likes Sakura-chan, he'll feed me as much chakra as I need, believe it!”

“How does he keep his energy up?” the squad commander from Kumo, Darui, asked. “I'm sorry to say that all this waiting is so dull.”

“We are dealing with, Uchiha Itachi! Defeating him won't be as easy as, counting 1-2-3!” chanted Killer Bee. Kakashi winced. Years of reading Jiraiya-sama's beautiful prose had left him with a sincere

appreciation of language, and Bee's constant rapping was an assault on his sensibilities.

"Quiet, all of you!" Samui barked. "We have to remain cool if we're going to fulfil our mission to Raikage-sama's satisfaction!"

Kakashi groaned as the remaining Kumo-nin all began doing the exact opposite of what Samui instructed, and chimed in with their own catchphrases. And he'd thought Naruto's "Believe it!" had been bad. Yes, he was a failure of a sensei who couldn't protect anyone, but surely, karma was punishing him for it now.

Sakura followed behind Itachi, trying to keep up with his punishing pace without complaint. Maybe she should have travelled as Brainwashed Sakura after all, she thought sourly. The lovesick girl would have been falling over herself to impress Itachi with her speed. She tried to take comfort in the fact that even Konan with her impressive sensory range had not been able to detect more than a few scattered ninja lying in wait for them.

Itachi, however, was convinced that their would-be attackers had found a way to hide themselves. "They're knowingly taking me on, at the very least. They would be remiss not to prepare to take you on too, and if they've been observing us for any amount of time, they'd know Kisame and Konan are travelling with us as well. There must be a larger ambush prepared." On hearing this reasoning, Sakura had to admit that it made a great deal of sense. Still, they'd agreed to keep to the original arrangement of travelling separately. Itachi had insisted – he'd said that it was safer that way, since one pair could come to the aid of another if necessary. Privately, he'd admitted to Sakura that he did not trust Konan at their backs in the case of an ambush.

She tried not to think about his implication that he did trust her to have his back.

She tried to stay alert to their surroundings, keeping her focus on leaping between the distant trees in the Land of Lightning's sparse forestation, instead of drifting off and daydreaming about what had happened the night before. Her cheeks grew flushed as she thought back to just how forward she'd been –

She cut that line of thinking off with a wince. *Enough of that! Keep your eyes on your environment, now.* And sure enough, she spotted it at the same time that Itachi did, and both of them stopped moving. A toad. A crimson toad, which certainly wasn't native to the area.

"Kōsuke's sent the message! Gamakichi, I'm sending you out with Darui's squad! We'll be having dinner at Ichiraku's with Sakura-chan by the end of the week, believe it!" yelled Naruto, as he performed the reverse summoning jutsu to send Darui's squad to the designated location the messenger toad had identified on the path between Kasaki and Kumogakure.

Immediately after Darui's squad disappeared, another alert came in. Another of the paths they'd been watching had been activated. Kakashi had to admit he was impressed with how much Naruto had improved – the boy was remarkably fast in weaving signs, and he showed no signs of the toll that reverse summoning such a large group must have taken on him. Inexplicable as it seemed, perhaps Naruto wasn't simply being optimistic when he claimed that he had reached an accord with the kyuubi.

Let this work. Let Sakura return to us safe, and I can begin making up for what an irresponsible sensei I've been.

Itachi had been right, Sakura thought numbly as she saw four unfamiliar nin appear around them with the tell-tale pops that indicated the reverse summoning jutsu. They were wearing headbands which indicated that they were from Kumo.

She found herself with her back pressed against a tree, her breath coming in short, shallow pants. She couldn't bring herself to move, and could only watch in silence as Itachi whirled and blocked and kicked faster than her eyes could track, holding off four skilled shinobi at once.

Part of her screamed to support Itachi as he must have expected. But the part of her that was used to stopping Naruto from his more reckless impulses reminded her that she could not risk defending Itachi. Not from ninja who would know she was a shinobi of Konoha, and not when it could be taken as an act of aggression from Konoha to Kumo, jeopardizing an already fragile alliance. She still recalled well the late nights of bringing sake to Tsunade-shishou as her master fretted about keeping the alliance of the five villages intact, and grumbled about just how difficult it was to work with the enormous egos of the Raikage and the Tsuchikage.

She briefly considered knocking Itachi out while he was distracted by the battle and surrendering to the Kumo nin. She was extremely certain that they had been sent to track her and Itachi on purpose –

she thought she could recognize the dark-skinned man as the Raikage's right hand. He would not be sent away from the Raikage's side for frivolous reasons. So, this had to be a mission to retrieve her. Perhaps she could insist that Itachi be brought with her to Konoha? It would make sense. After all, as a missing-nin from Konoha, he would need to face Konoha's justice.

And once they were back in the village, with Tsunade-shishou aware of the irregularities involved in the official reports of the massacre, they could re-open the investigation. Find out what really happened, discover some mitigating factor that could clear him of his crimes. Maybe he'd been forced to do it. Maybe he'd been blackmailed, or placed under a genjutsu, or...

She didn't know what possible explanation could satisfactorily answer the question of what on earth could force *Uchiha Itachi* to do something he did not want to. But she knew now that whatever he had done to his clan, it had not been of his own will. Not after she had stayed with him and comforted him through the nightmares that tormented him after she'd forced him to relive the massacre. Not after he'd shed tears together with her on the anniversary of the massacre.

And that thought, coupled with the memory of how he'd held her the previous night, sealed it. She could not help him, but she could not betray him either, no matter how much she thought it would benefit him in the end. And she could not risk it in any case – what if Kumo refused to give him to Konoha for justice? What if they executed him first as a dangerous threat?

And so, it was almost as if she'd travelled back in time five years, always watching another fight against overwhelming odds while all she could do was hang back and weep as she uselessly watched his back.

He needed all his concentration for the fight – one against four was terrible odds, even for someone of his abilities. The terrain did not help matters – they'd been ambushed along the mountain path, a precarious downslope with a sharp drop just a few metres to his left. He fought to disable rather than kill as he always did. With this terrain, though, he could not risk using his favourite Water Dragon Bullet jutsu – he might knock them off the edge of the mountain.

Thankfully, his opponents seemed similarly disinclined to use ninjutsu, and instead engaged him in a purely taijutsu battle, with

occasional swings of blades from the dark-skinned man and one of the blonde men. Itachi tossed shuriken in a manner that appeared careless whenever their blades got too close to him.

From time to time, he glanced back to ensure the safety of the kunoichi who had breathed life back into his cursed existence, who had come to mean everything to him. He was relieved to note that Sakura hadn't joined the fight as he'd feared. He didn't know what would be worse – if she'd joined him against the Kumo nin, or if she'd joined them against him. Neither was an alternative he wanted to consider too deeply.

They must be here for Sakura, he realized. The blonde woman's eyes kept flicking toward Sakura, as if looking for an opening to get to her. He should just feign being defeated and allow them to retrieve her.

He'd figured out while fighting them that they must be here on Konoha's orders – Tsunade must have acted on Sakura's intel. He had to admit he was impressed at how quickly she'd managed to get the Raikage to cooperate enough to send out such an elite squad, with four ANBU-level members. And he could also sense massive amounts of chakra being wielded nearby. They'd even managed to send out enough skilled shinobi to keep Kisame and Konan occupied.

And then, the dark-skinned man and the two blonde men rushed him while the blonde woman darted toward Sakura, in what was clearly a practiced formation. Energy began to crackle in the dark-skinned man's hands – he was gathering lightning chakra. This was it. He just needed to allow the nin to hit him, and he could fulfil his unspoken promises to allow Sakura her escape.

And yet, he hesitated. How could he be sure of his deductions? There was no guarantee that Kumo intended to honour their alliance with Konoha – this could be a way for them to gain leverage over Tsunade instead, with Sakura a valuable hostage.

It only took a second, and yet, in that single moment, an entire flood of thoughts and memories coursed through his mind. His knowledge of Kumo's torture and interrogation techniques, which was nowhere near as gentle as the Yamanaka clan's mental jutsu. The certainty that regardless of her innocence, a known contact of the Akatsuki like Sakura would not be released from Kumo's custody until they'd made certain she had given them every last drop of information she had to give.

And then, he thought of the night before. How bereft he'd felt lying alone in his futon, especially when he had the memory of Sakura falling asleep in his arms to haunt him. How she must have felt the same, for she'd suddenly gotten up from her own futon and padded toward him. How wide and uncertain her eyes had been, and he'd recalled seeing that very anxiety on her face through his crows every time Sasuke had pushed her away as a child. How she'd nervously slipped into his futon, with her back to his, the way they'd always slept in Akatsuki headquarters. How he'd felt that he could not allow her courage to go unacknowledged, how he'd turned toward her and pulled her closer into his arms so that they'd fallen asleep with him spooning her, and how all had felt right with the world.

He loved her with all his heart, and he would not take risks when it came to her wellbeing. He would not take the easy path out, would not forsake his responsibility to her. He would forge a path for her to directly make her way back to Konoha, without being picked up by other hidden villages.

With all the speed at his disposal, he formed the signs for the shadow clone jutsu. Three of them popped into existence, so he would have one to engage each opponent present along the mountain path. And then, four sets of Sharingan blazing with fury, he activated Tsukuyomi on four opponents all at once. He'd never done anything so risky before, but it was the only guaranteed way for him to disable all of them quickly enough for Sakura to get away.

The strain it took on him was too much. The chakra shields he'd kept up to coat his lungs and keep him from coughing every few minutes failed, and it was five nin who stumbled to the ground, three immediately falling unconscious, one coughing blood into his hands.

And the final one, the dark-skinned one, retaining enough of his faculties for one final shot before he fell. Although he'd lost the lightning chakra he was moulding, he drew a kunai and flung it at Itachi, who, wracked by a fit of bloody coughs, was unable to dodge. The kunai pierced his lungs, and he saw the dark-skinned man fall to the ground. His vision began to grow dark and spotty, and Itachi felt himself fall as well.

And then, his favourite scent of sage and rosemary and mint enveloped him, and he could vaguely make out pink in his field of vision. He tried to reach his hands out for her, to touch her one last time, but he could not seem to make his arms move. As he choked and gurgled on his own blood, he knew that this was it. He would not live

to allow Sasuke his vengeance. And yet, he could not bring himself to regret it. He'd once told Kisame that those who killed their comrades never had a decent death, but this, dying in protection of someone he loved, was as honourable a death as he could have received.

He needed her to know.

Sakura's heart was in her throat as she watched Itachi's clones poof out of existence, and she screamed when the squad leader's kunai pierced Itachi. At that moment, she felt nothing but bitter regret and shame. What did Konoha's political standing with Kumo matter, when Itachi had been injured so gravely by her inaction?

Ignoring the fallen Kumo nin, she ran to Itachi and began pushing her chakra into him. She could not let him die. He was choking and gurgling with blood, and yet, he still made the effort to speak. She shushed him, begged him not to strain his body's rapidly diminishing resources even further. Stubborn ass that he was, he did not listen.

"Love... you," he choked out. "Worth it."

No, it was not, she wanted to scream. She hadn't even been able to bring herself to lift a finger to help him. How was she worth sacrificing his life for?

"Go home," he managed. "Leave," and with that final word, his voice trailed off, and his eyes fell shut.

"No!" she screamed, and with renewed fury, she shoved her chakra into his chest. There was so much damage there. Damage that she could have already healed, if he'd only allowed her to take a look at him before this. His lungs were ravaged by disease and inflammation, and it was a wonder he'd been able to *breathe* normally, let alone keep up the abilities of an elite shinobi.

There was so much for her to do. She almost didn't know where to begin – so many of the blood vessels lining his lungs had burst, and he was drowning in his own blood. It seemed an almost ironic repetition of what she'd endured when Itachi had stabbed her on Konan's orders.

But if there was something Sakura had faith in, it was her own medical abilities. As long as his heart was still beating, she stood a chance. She'd never lost a patient in the middle of a healing session before, and she'd be *damned* if she began with the man she loved.

Chapter End Notes

WHEW. We've finally gotten to this point! I've been building toward this (and the next chapter) for a while, and it's so so exciting to get it out in the world. I've never written a fight scene in my life so this one focused more on thoughts and emotions, but I'm hoping to eventually build to describing a proper fight.

No Good Choices

Chapter Notes

OMG you guys... thank you for all the support you've given this fic! I almost teared up when I realized that it passed 500 kudos and 10K hits. All of you are amazing and wonderful and yeah I just have a lot of emotions!

The longer Sakura worked over Itachi's body, the more problems she found.

The blood vessels lining his lungs had ruptured and he was drowning in his own fluids – and that was just the most obvious issue. His heart and gastrointestinal tract were heavily inflamed, his kidneys were on the verge of shutting down, some of the nerves near his hands and feet were damaged, and to top it all off, his immune system was attacking his own cells.

And that was not including the obvious stab wound in the middle of his chest which was still bleeding at an alarming rate. At this point, it was more a question of what *wasn't* wrong with his body than what was.

She had so much to do. She had to help him replenish his blood, his skin had taken on an unearthly pallor; she had to close up the various ruptures in his body; she had to remove the fluid from his lungs... and those were just the most critical tasks. It was too much for one person to handle alone.

She glanced nervously at the fallen Kumo nin. They hadn't shown any signs of stirring so far – Itachi's jutsu had gotten them *good*. Yet, she could still see their chests moving evenly. They were alive, and breathing. He'd attacked to disable, not kill. She filed that additional titbit away as she considered them, and realized that they would surely regain consciousness soon, and she and Itachi had to be long gone by then. She pushed down the stab of guilt that threatened to rise within her. It was simply a distraction at the moment, and Itachi needed all her focus and concentration.

First things first. She had to stabilize him enough to transport him. Once she got him to a secure location, she could work on everything that was really wrong with him.

She cursed under her breath. She was as woefully unprepared for this situation as she could have been. All her pre-prepared seals would do no good here – even the triaging seal she was so proud of was more geared toward injuries and wounds than the fucked up mess that was Itachi's body. She ripped off his shirt and began feverishly drawing seals on his body. They would not do much in the way of treatment, but they would keep him alive for a while.

That done, she picked him up in her arms. She would not risk carrying him across her shoulders or her back – she needed to be able to monitor his breathing and heart rate, and immediately stop to resuscitate him if it became necessary.

She bit her lip as she considered the chakra that she could sense being wielded. As helpful as Kisame could possibly be, he wouldn't be able to do much in the middle of a battle. And in any case, she couldn't be sure that Konan would be that opposed to Itachi's death. She shuddered at the thought of putting Itachi in even greater danger.

Onward it was. When Kisame and Konan were done with their fight, they could come looking for her. And hopefully, by that time, she would have done enough for Itachi that nothing further could hurt him.

Konan perched on a tree branch, and watched as Kisame toyed with the hachibi jinchuriki within the large water dome he'd created. She couldn't believe Kumo had sent their *jinchuriki* to this battle. Why had they spent five years hiding him away, only to send him on an ambush of the very people who sought to capture him?

It didn't make sense. Was Kumo that foolish, or so eager to kill Akatsuki that they'd knowingly risk their jinchuriki? And they'd sent the more politically important one too – the one the Raikage called his brother. And they hadn't even sent a decent team to accompany him. It had been laughably easy for Konan to kill all of them with her paper spears. The wind chakra that propelled and sharpened the paper had quickly cut through their lightning-natured jutsu and then their bodies, and she had swiftly gotten out of the way. The fight between the hachibi and Kisame was not one that would be kind to bystanders.

The butterflies which she'd set to watch Itachi informed her that his chakra signature was fading in and out, and that the kunoichi was running from their battle with him in her arms. Had been running for the past hour. She frowned, reconsidering her earlier conclusions.

Itachi was undoubtedly badly injured, enough for it to have had a significant effect on his chakra signature. The erratic pattern her butterflies sensed was indicative of a shinobi fighting to live, and was not the kind of thing that could be faked. And she did not think Itachi would willingly take on such severe injuries just to keep up a farce that the Kumo nin were a threat. She'd seen the way he fought over the past ten years. He always sought to end battles quickly and decisively, and he always sought to minimize injury to his own person. As if he was afraid of taking damage. She had miscalculated, then. The threat by the Kumo nin was real, and not a cover for him to meet his agents.

But for the kunoichi, who had fallen rather quickly to Sasori's senbon, to still be mobile and to be able to carry to Itachi to safety? It didn't make sense. Not unless Itachi had defended her and taken the brunt of the injuries *for* her.

Just how critical was the kunoichi to their plans that Itachi would almost sacrifice himself to protect her?

She quickly revised her own plans. This was her chance to get some idea of what the hell Madara was planning, and to finally get the upper hand. Itachi was a genius, to be sure, but there was no way he could have planned to be as vulnerable as he was at that moment.

She glanced back at the battle between the jinchuriki and Kisame. The water dome had dissolved, which would normally mean that Kisame had gained the upper hand. And yet... she frowned as she realized that Kisame had been tricked, somehow. The jinchuriki he'd been fighting had disappeared, and two more appeared, one behind Kisame, and the other to his side. The blasted creature was using *clones*. And Kisame was no longer wielding Samehada, either.

He was actually in trouble.

An echo from the past, of Yahiko briefing them before their first ever mission as Akatsuki. "Leave nobody behind. There is no such thing as collateral damage or a justifiable loss. We are all important, for we only have one another."

And yet, Yahiko was gone. Betrayed by someone they'd trusted to honour the rules of truce and negotiation. And now, she no longer trusted anyone in the organization to protect Nagato except herself. And Kisame was a dirty traitor, she reminded herself. Nagato had taken Kisame in when he'd appeared at Ame, ragged and asking to

join Akatsuki. He'd said he'd heard of them from a reliable source, and wanted in. Nagato had trusted Kisame, and Kisame had chosen to side with Madara and Itachi.

She hardened her heart and departed. There could only be one King on the shoji board, and hers was Nagato. There was no room for anything else, for anyone else. Not in this situation.

Gathering her paper to her to form wings, she flew in the direction her butterflies indicated Itachi and the kunoichi were.

After an hour of running, Sakura stopped. The location she'd chosen to stop was hardly secure, but it was far more defensible than any of the other potential spots she'd found. Cliffs *looked* safe, but she knew that any shinobi worth their salt would have no difficulty climbing one if they were determined enough, and the risk that she or Itachi could fall off the edge was too high. No, the dead end she'd found, surrounded by rock formations on all sides except the tiny path that led there, was far better. At least one part of her luck was with her today.

She sat Itachi down so that his torso was slightly elevated – it could only help his breathing. She dropped her pack and created a shadow clone. It was hardly efficient, splitting her already limited pool of chakra in two that way, but she had no choice. She needed an extra pair of hands to make sure that he didn't die from one organ's failure while she was working over another.

Every pulse of chakra she sent into his body was an apology, every sip of water she poured down his throat to keep him hydrated was a prayer for him to live. Every food pill she administered to him to keep his chakra levels up was a promise that she would save him, every food pill she herself downed was a strengthening of her resolve to keep that promise.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, a constant chant in her head. There had been no good choices in that situation. Her actions would have jeopardized either Konoha or Itachi no matter what she'd done. And yet, at least if she'd *made* a decision, it might have made the situation better. She'd simply frozen, unable to decide what to do.

She hadn't just been useless, no. She'd been worse than useless. A liability that Itachi had given his life to protect. She was not worthy of his love or his care.

Her tears continued to fall as she worked.

And then, she felt her clone dissipate, and the influx of knowledge that entailed. When she managed to gather her wits about her, there was a hand around her throat, and her back was aching from being slammed against one of the rocky walls. Her hands and legs were pinned to the wall by something she couldn't see, and she could feel sharp edges hovering near her wrists. She couldn't try to weave signs – not restrained like this.

She looked into cold, amber eyes, and felt dread. There was not a hint of mercy to be found in the face she beheld.

“Konan-san,” she whispered, her voice raspy and hoarse. She made her eyes look downward in a pretense of submission. She wasn't sure she could pull off being Brainwashed Sakura, but she had to at least try. She couldn't fail Itachi by being utterly useless again.

Her heart thudded sickly. Oh, Kami, *Itachi*. His heart had stopped earlier, and she had just gotten it beating again when she'd been shoved against the wall. What if it stopped again while she was away from him, being held here?

“You will tell me your plans, kunoichi,” Konan said coldly.

Sakura blinked. Plans? What could she possibly mean? She and Itachi had been careful, she was sure. And in any case, they'd never really discussed any solid *plans*. Not since her presentation to the Akatsuki. They'd been more concerned with keeping her alive, and Itachi out of the Akatsuki's suspicion.

“What do you mean?” she asked, finally. Perhaps Konan would give her a hint as to what she wanted. Despair filled her. At this point, she would tell Konan anything she wanted to hear if she would just allow her to finish healing Itachi. Just enough so that he could live to seek proper medical attention.

She felt her head slam back into the wall. “Don't act stupid, kunoichi!” Konan shouted harshly. “I heard you, with him, that day. You're not as *damaged* as you pretend to be! You called him by name! I know the two of you are plotting something, and you are going to tell me everything right now.”

The hand that was holding her by her throat moved her, and Sakura was able to see Itachi's body, lying there helpless, with a paper spear hovering above his throat. She thanked every deity she could think of once she spotted that his chest was moving slowly, evenly. The fluid she had cleared from his lungs and the patching she'd done on all his

wounds, both internal and external, were enough, at least for the moment. He was still breathing. His heart was still beating.

“You care for him,” Konan growled. “I know you do. I saw you cling to him as you cried. He took injuries for you. You’d better start talking now, or he dies.”

Sakura gulped, and looked back into Konan’s eyes. So empty of all emotion, except for an almost manic gleam. She revised her earlier decision. Konan was furious, and this seemed almost personal. From everything Konan had said, Sakura gathered that she’d somehow managed to spy on them as they’d gotten drunk on the anniversary of the Uchiha massacre.

She felt another surge of anger at her own idiocy pass through her. Itachi had been emotionally vulnerable, and what had she done? Had she kept her guard up and taken care of him? Had she watched over him? No, she’d *joined* him in his misery, and she’d created an opening for Konan to spy on them. From what she had already threatened Sakura with, she figured that Konan must think Itachi had betrayed the Akatsuki. Which... if she was being honest, probably wasn’t all that far from the truth.

She had no doubt that even if she managed to produce definitive proof that Itachi was completely and utterly loyal to the organization, both of them would die here today. She took a deep breath. Itachi had protected her, cared for her, and he’d taught her enough that she could use to defend herself. And now, it was time for her to repay everything he’d done for her, and to protect *him*.

She’d said time and time again that her biggest weapon was being underestimated, and even as Konan considered her enough of a threat to bind her hands and legs, she had failed to consider that she was still making skin-to-skin contact with Sakura. And Sakura’s impeccable chakra control meant that she was more than capable of sending out very precise pulses of chakra through any exposed skin, even though it was easiest with her hands.

“I don’t know much, I swear,” she gasped, and Konan shook her. Sakura continued buying time as she shaped her chakra to the particular form she wanted and directed it to her neck, where Konan’s hands were. “Please, you have to believe me – he said that I needed to obey all his instructions and act like I was in love with him, and he’d spare Sasuke,” she cried, wildly grasping at anything that might keep Konan satisfied.

“What instructions did he give you?” Konan demanded. “And how long has this been going on?”

At that moment, Sakura managed to gather the chakra that she needed, and *pushed*. She'd never tried applying her genjutsu technique from anywhere other than the scalp before, but Sakura was a damn good medic, and she knew the nervous system like the back of her own hand. And the hands were one of the densest areas of nerves. Once she'd moulded the yin chakra necessary, it was a simple enough matter to direct it through Konan's nervous system, and shove the chakra all the way to Konan's amygdala – the fear centre of the brain.

Konan's grip on her immediately loosened, and her eyes went wide. Sakura felt the paper restraining her flutter to the ground harmlessly, and saw that the spear which had been threatening Itachi had dissipated as well. Konan fell to the ground, gasping and twitching, and began hyperventilating. Sakura immediately turned her over, and pressed down on the pressure point she was looking for, and Konan's body relaxed into unconsciousness.

She paused, uncertain. Her normal instinct would have been to simply leave Konan unconscious, and to take Itachi and run again. But Konan's sensory range was huge, and she had no idea when she'd wake up, and if they'd manage to get out of her range by the time she regained consciousness. By right, pressing on that pressure point on the back of the neck should keep someone out of commission for hours – she would know, having been subjected to it when Sasuke had left the village. But Sakura had learned to never take anything for granted, especially not from the Akatsuki.

I've already failed Itachi once, and he almost died for it. I can't fail him again.

And yet... she was a medic. She saved lives. The very first oath she'd taken had been to do no harm. With the exception of one occasion, every other time she'd taken a life had been because she had no other choice, and had been in the heat of battle, where she had been able to justify to herself that it was self-defence – kill or be killed. And even on that one occasion that had been the exception, she'd been administering euthanasia; she'd told herself over and over that the patient had begged for mercy, and that she was honouring the patient's wishes.

This, though... Even though she knew Konan was a threat so long as she breathed, she looked so vulnerable. And she knew Konan had no

desire to die. Sakura fell to her knees, and she felt like she was going to be sick. How could this even be something she needed to think about? Itachi was *right there* and he could be *dying* and it should be the simplest thing in the world to just do it, to just kill her while she was defenceless so she could keep Itachi safe.

Itachi, she reminded herself. It was for Itachi. Leaving Konan alive would threaten Itachi's safety. This was another situation where there were no good choices, and she'd be damned if she allowed herself to freeze again. It was her turn to protect him. And if the choice came down to choosing between Itachi and Konan, there was no fight. She would choose Itachi every time. Even if it meant sacrificing her conscience and all her morals to do it. Because if she didn't, if she let Konan live, anything that subsequently happened to Itachi would still be on her. There was no way forward that left her hands clean, and she had to make the choice that she could live with.

She drew her hand into her mouth to remove the poison pouch she'd sealed to her cheek all those days ago. It needed a constant flow of chakra to keep the seal active, and it was a drain on her chakra that she could ill afford, when she needed every drop to heal Itachi. And it was a way for her to dispose of Konan without wasting even more of her limited chakra. As she removed the pouch, she wondered vaguely if this was the same choice Itachi had made when he'd massacred his own clan. If he'd weighed all the possibilities, and realized that the choice he'd eventually made had been the least shitty one. Knowing what she knew of Itachi's personality, she was certain that was the way it had happened.

Once disconnected from her cheek and the flow of chakra to the pouch stopped, the seal dissolved, revealing the blackwort. Sakura did not allow herself to hesitate. In one smooth movement, she shoved her handful of deadly poison down Konan's throat. She watched as the unconscious kunoichi choked, and her mouth foamed. Once Konan was still, she checked for a pulse. There was none.

She would no longer be a threat to Itachi.

Now that she no longer had to worry about potentially alerting a sensor, she summoned Katsuyu, and asked her to continue to work on healing Itachi. Sakura killed all feeling within her, and got to work on prepping Konan's body for sealing and transport. When she eventually made it back to Konoha, there would be much the medical corps could learn from her body.

She had made the best choice she could, she told herself. And one day, she might even come to believe it.

Turn Around, Bright Eyes

Chapter Notes

This chapter's title comes from the song "Total Eclipse of the Heart", which I feel is absolutely perfect for this point in their relationship.

This chapter is NSFW, so find yourself a good private corner for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He is floating, and he feels serene. Peaceful. He hears a tinkling laugh before he sees eyes the colour of spring, sparkling with mirth, leaning over him. Lips that match her hair in colour are twisted in a warm smile, and her hand is patting him on the shoulder.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” she laughs. “Before I tell Shisui that the greatest shinobi of our time needed to be pulled out of bed like a child.”

“M’not greatest,” he mumbles, tugging on her hand. She doesn’t budge, so he tugs harder, and with a squeal, she is lying on top of him, and she is giggling, and he is pressing kisses to his wife’s face.

“Itachi!” she cries, trying to wiggle out of his grip. He only smiles, and holds her tighter. As if he would ever let her go.

“Aniki, you do realize we can hear *everything*, don’t you?” a familiar voice asks wryly. Itachi sits up, still clutching Sakura to his chest, and he sees his brother, standing in the doorway of his room. His eyes are so light, so unburdened, and though he looks disgusted, it is mixed with fondness. Behind his brother stands three more figures with black hair and black eyes. His father. His mother. Shisui.

All of them smiling, laughing, enjoying this moment with him. And in that moment, Sakura curled around him, his family surrounding him, he feels utterly content.

“Itachi,” his wife murmurs. Her voice sounds different, now. “Itachi? Itachi!”

And then the peaceful vision faded, and he was so, so, tired. The gentle pats on his shoulder turned into a more urgent shaking, and his

arms and legs felt so heavy, and his head felt as if it was stuffed full of cotton.

“Itachi, I need you to open your eyes.”

His eyelids felt as if they were weighed down with lead. But for her, he was willing to make any effort. Slowly, with excruciating effort, he opened his eyes. It was bright at first. Too bright. He blinked heavily. And then, the world came into focus – sharper focus than he could remember having beheld in years. He could see the lines of worry on Sakura’s face, her eyebags, and he could see every strand of her petal-pink hair in detail. She also wasn’t wearing those damnable yukatas, and was back in her usual vest and skirt, he noticed.

She was saying something, but he couldn’t bring himself to listen, all his attention fixed on watching how her eyes darted about with concern, how her lips moved as they formed words.

He was dead, he knew. Was this the afterlife? Did one truly exist? He hoped that if it did, Sakura was only a part of the vision that had been granted to him, and that she was not dead along with him. She had so much more to live for.

And then, suddenly, her lips twisted in a frown, and he wanted to protest, wanted to ask what made her so unhappy so that he could go resolve it for her. To his shock, she slapped him. Hard.

He blinked.

“Sakura?” he asked, confused. His voice was raspy, and getting the word out was an effort.

“Oh good, you were just spacing out,” she said, relief in her voice. “I was starting to get worried that there was brain damage that I’d missed, though I don’t normally make mistakes like that. Here, have some water,” she said, producing a glass. She made as if she was going to pass it to him, and then hesitated. She instead placed a hand under his head and tilted it upwards, and slowly poured the water down his throat.

The cool sensation felt heavenly, as did her attentions. But her words triggered thought within Itachi. If she thought she’d missed brain damage, that meant... she’d attended to him? She’d healed him? But that couldn’t be right. He’d died, for her. They’d been on a mountain path, and now they were in a room, on a somewhat lumpy mattress, but far more comfortable than the outdoors all the same.

And he could see, and he could breathe effortlessly too, he realized. And even though he felt all kinds of tired and foggy, he did not feel any pain.

He tuned back in to what she was saying.

“We’ll need to get some real food into you too,” she was saying. “Your nutrient levels are dangerously low. Having to heal over *half your body* will do that to you.” Anger had entered her tone, then. “And you’ve been having nothing but food pills for the past 72 hours. Anymore will tax your body too much. And I don’t have the equipment necessary to set up a feeding tube, so this is our only option.”

His mind, which was working so slowly it felt as if he was wading through syrup, finally put the pieces together at that point.

“I’m not dead. You healed me,” he said, unsure of what it was he felt.

She glared at him. “Not for lack of trying on your part,” she muttered. “13 days, Itachi. There were 13 days after we made our pact that you could have asked me to take a look at you. I was by your side almost constantly, and you didn’t even ask me to check you over just once? It was a wonder you were even alive!”

Panic set in, then. She’d healed him. How much had she healed? His lungs, certainly, judging by how easily he breathed. His eyes. What else? How was Sasuke supposed to defeat him now? He’d been unconscious for 72 hours, she said. Three whole days. How much had she accomplished in that time?

“What was the extent of the damage, and what did you heal?” he asked, knowing he must sound incredibly ungrateful at that point. He couldn’t bring himself to care. He needed the information, needed to recalibrate his plans.

She rubbed her nose. “Stab wound in your chest from the kunai. Ruptures in the blood vessels lining your chest and gastrointestinal tract. Inflammation in your heart, peripheral neuropathy, damage to your kidneys. Your optic nerves were almost completely shredded. And you have an autoimmune disorder – I have no idea whether that’s what caused all the damage, or if it was a result of all the inflammation.”

She sighed deeply, and picked up his hand. “Itachi, I managed to repair almost all the existing damage. I’ve pretty much reset your body. But you have to know that you’re still definitely ill. All of that

had to come from *somewhere*, and I haven't had a chance to run any tests on the cause. Given time, your body will degrade again. And I know you're probably itching to get back into action, but you need to know that your body is extremely weak. You put it through a lot, it's recovering from undergoing major healing, and that's not even including your nutrient deficiencies. You're going to need to take it easy for at least a week. And if I had my way, I'd say two weeks minimum, but I know you won't listen."

He listened, his panic increasing with each sentence she'd spoken. He'd been so careful over the years, allowing his body to slowly shut down, yet avoiding any damage that would kill him before Sasuke had the chance to. And now, all of that effort, gone. Made meaningless by her. He knew she meant well, but at the moment, all he could feel was resentment.

He'd been content. He'd been ready to die. It was not the death he'd planned for, but it was some form of atonement. And now he still lived... but for what? How was Sasuke to believably defeat him this way?

He couldn't even look her in the eyes. He tugged his hand out of hers, avoiding her gaze so he wouldn't have to see the hurt that was almost certainly etched onto it. He tried to get up, but she was right. His body was weak. He couldn't move.

"I need to be alone," he muttered, hating that he was reduced to this. He kept his gaze fixed on his hands, and he heard her footsteps as she left, and the gentle thud of the door closing. Guilt raged through him as he heard a choked sob, but it was immediately eclipsed by his need to plan. He had to salvage his plans. Somehow.

Slowly, over the next couple of days, Itachi began to regain his strength. And he planned.

It was clear to him that Sakura was becoming far too attached to him, and he to her. She'd had a prime opportunity to flee back to Konoha, and she hadn't used it, even though he was unconscious and Konan was dead.

There was a flare of warmth in his chest, then, as he thought of the fact that Sakura cared enough to stay behind to heal him, to make sure he was alive. He shoved it aside mercilessly. He'd indulged himself far too much already. There was no more room for his selfishness.

It was only a matter of time before Obito or Pain contacted him, he knew. It was a wonder they had not already – as part of their communications functions, the Akatsuki rings also transmitted the location of the wearer. His would have indicated that he'd been in the same general location for five days at this point.

He wondered if they were aware, or suspected, about Konan's death. He wondered if Kisame was alive.

The easiest thing to do now would be to report in, claim that he'd been injured and Sakura had healed him, that they'd found Konan's body and that Sakura had collected it. It would maintain his status within Akatsuki, and he would be able to regroup while he waited for Sasuke's eventual search for him. According to his informants, news about Sakura's capture had reached Oto. It was only a matter of time.

And yet... to return to Akatsuki would place Sakura at risk, and he was no longer confident of his ability to protect her. Before, she'd had a purpose to serve in acting as bait. Now, though, if Pain learned that she'd had anything at all to do with Konan's death, any purpose she could possibly have wouldn't matter. Her life would be forfeit. And even with all the abilities his Mangekyō was capable of, even with his newly healed body, he knew that he would be ill-matched against the Rinnegan.

A month ago, it wouldn't even have been a decision he would have needed to contemplate. His plans for Sasuke were his top priority. But that was before she'd made a home for herself in his heart and his life. He could no longer stand the thought of a world where her brightness didn't shine.

His objectivity was already compromised, he knew. He'd had a prime opportunity to allow her to escape with those Kumo nin, and he hadn't taken it. He had almost died, and he had considered it well worth the sacrifice of all his plans for Sasuke, if only Sakura could be safe.

At that moment, he realized that there was no real decision to make. His own position within Akatsuki, Sasuke's ability to find peace in his death, none of it was as important to him as Sakura anymore. She would need to be returned to Konoha, and that was that.

He waited patiently for Sakura to return, his things packed and fully dressed. She'd gone out to buy some more food. Once she returned, he would break the news to her.

He almost found himself wishing he'd indulged more. Wishing he hadn't allowed her to spend the past two nights sleeping on the floor so that she would not "disturb his recovery", wishing he'd insisted that she sleep in his arms again. Wishing he'd snatched a few kisses that didn't happen in a genjutsu.

He reminded himself that this was for the best, though. She was too attached. He needed to cut things off right now, before she got even more hurt.

She entered, then, and her eyes flicked about, taking stock of how his things had been removed from the room, how he was dressed. She immediately dropped the food she'd bought on a side table and glared at him.

"I told you that you needed to rest!" she snapped. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

This would be it. His final conversation with her. He steeled himself. His emotionless mask was in place, and he was as ready as he'd ever be to shatter his heart into pieces.

"I'm leaving," he said quietly. "Thank you for caring for me. You should return to Konoha. I've left you a map, money, and other items that I thought you might need." Her eyes widened in shock.

"L-leaving?" she choked out. "Why?"

"I must return to Akatsuki. It has been at least five days since I last reported in, and my position is now precarious."

Her hands twisted in her shirt, and it killed Itachi to see the confusion and betrayal etched all over her features.

It is for the best, he reminded himself. This was necessary. It would only be better for her in the long run.

"But what about me?" she whispered.

"We have a prime opportunity for you to return home and for us to free ourselves of our oaths, and you expect me to bring you along?" he asked coolly. "Or do you expect me to walk you to Konoha's borders as if you were a child? I had thought more highly of your abilities than that."

Lies, it was all lies. He had no intention of letting her out of his sight

until he saw for himself that she was safely within the borders of the Land of Fire. If he could manage it, he would secretly tail her all the way to Konoha itself.

She shook her head, then, resolve settling in her features. He felt a spark of admiration for her. He'd intended those words to cut her down, and they'd instead strengthened her. No wonder he'd fallen so hard for her. She did not allow anything to bring her down.

"No. I'm not leaving you. If you show up there alone, it will make things worse for you. And I'm not confident that you can even make it there without passing out," she said firmly.

And yet, in this instance, the very thing he admired about her was what was impeding his plans. Unconsciously, he ground his jaw.

"Do you not have people who care for you, and who will await your return in Konoha? Do you not have research to continue so that you can save lives? Do you not have precious people to protect? And you wish to throw it all away, and for what? For a traitor? A killer?" he spat.

"I killed Konan," she said quietly. Tears welled up in her eyes. "She was defenceless and unconscious, and I killed her in cold blood because I had someone more important to protect." Her eyes fixed on him, then, her gaze steady, as if she was seeing right through him. "I understood you better in that moment than I ever have, Itachi." She moved closer to him, and Itachi found himself unable to move as her hand cupped his cheek.

"I don't know everything. But I know *enough*. I know you hate yourself for what you did. I know you try so hard to avoid killing – it would have been so much easier for you to just kill all those Kumo shinobi with a good fire jutsu, but you knocked them unconscious instead. Even though it almost killed you. I know now that there are times when there are no good choices, and you just have to make the one that sucks the least. You're Konoha's agent in Akatsuki, aren't you? You're no traitor, Itachi. No more than I am," she said with certainty.

"No," he whispered, his voice hoarse. He needed to leave right now. If he stayed, he knew that he'd never again be able to bring himself to leave her side. The temptation called to him, then. The dream he'd had, of sleeping deeply and waking up to her sweet presence and her joyous laughter. It could be *real*. She'd healed his body, and while she hadn't found the root cause, he felt more alive than he had in years,

more than he'd ever thought even medical chakra could accomplish. He could be with her.

Then, an image of Sasuke intruded on his thoughts. Sasuke, his eyes full of anger. Sasuke, the innocent brother he'd tortured and twisted to follow a path of hate, to the extent he'd been willing to betray his village to one of their worst enemies, to almost kill someone who'd been his *teammate* in a cruel manner. Sasuke, who would never find peace as long as Itachi lived.

What right did he have to take the beautiful life Sakura offered to him when Sasuke suffered, suffered because of his actions?

Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum.

"No," he repeated, more force behind his tone, now. He gently removed her hand from his face, and turned away from her. "I am leaving without you, Sakura. I do not wish for you to come with me. And if you fight me on this, I will knock you out and deposit your body outside Konoha before I proceed back to Akatsuki headquarters."

Her arms wrapped around him, then, and she clutched tightly at him, as if trying to hold him with her by force.

"You said you love me," she whispered, and he could *hear* the effort it took her to keep her voice level, to shove down the sobs that were clearly making themselves felt. "You said it was worth it." Her voice cracked as she lost the battle to stay in control. "Is that it, then? Am I worth dying for, but not staying for?"

Every muscle in his body screamed for him to turn, to face her, to take her into his arms, to assure her that all he could wish for was to stay by her side. He allowed himself to feel the agony. This was a sacrifice that he would make once and be done with. This was a sacrifice he knew how to make.

He remained still, and silent, as she sobbed into his back.

"Every man I've ever cared about left me, Itachi," she wept. "Sasuke left for revenge. Naruto left to get stronger. Kakashi-sensei left to re-join ANBU. My father left, chose to die rather than keep fighting, to try to live for my mother and me. Don't leave me too. It'll kill me."

He felt his breathing become laboured with the effort of keeping himself still. The sheer pain in her voice...

"I have people who care for me, yes. I have precious people to protect. But you're one of them now, too. I love you, Itachi. And without you, my life will be empty and lonely even if I'm surrounded by others. Don't leave me," she begged, and it broke his heart. He couldn't even find any sort of joy in knowing his feelings were returned, not when it had already caused her pain, and would only cause her more.

He couldn't pretend indifference anymore. He turned to face her and held her body close.

"I love you so much, Sakura," he whispered raggedly. "It kills me to have to do this. But I can't – I can't protect you from Akatsuki. I'm not strong enough. Not to take all of them on. I can't return to Konoha. And I can't offer you any sort of life that you deserve. I won't have you spend your life running and hiding from both Akatsuki and Konoha."

More lies. He could return to Konoha. He had that mission scroll the Third had insisted he take. The one which detailed that he'd been following orders when he'd massacred the clan and defected. He remembered with perfect clarity every letter he'd sent to Jiraiya, and could reproduce them as proof of his continued loyalty to his village.

But to do so would be to abandon Sasuke. He could not. He would not.

She looked into his eyes. "Any kind of life with you would be better than one without you," she said, tears still falling. She reached up and stroked his face. "Every moment with you is worth the hardship. And if you've found a way to serve Konoha even as a missing nin, I can too."

"No," he said, horrified. That she would even consider – "No. I cannot allow that." She was innocent, and she'd never done anything wrong except to fall in love with the worst possible person she could.

"It's not about what you will and will not allow, Itachi," she replied fiercely. "You don't get to make decisions for me. You don't get to decide by yourself that we won't be together because it's too difficult. I love you, and you love me. You can't just say that I'm not allowed to make sacrifices for the one I love. You're worth it, Itachi. Don't give up on us. Don't leave me too."

Itachi broke.

It was too much. His own agony at contemplating spending even his

last few days without her. The knowledge that it was too late, that no matter what he did now, she would be hurt. Her tears, her selfless love. It was too much, and he could not stand against the tidal wave that their combined emotions made.

It will hurt her less if you leave her by dying than if you leave her of your own free will, his temptations whispered. *Spend your last days with her. Surely, you can have that little happiness, if it means she will be happy for those days too.*

He surrendered. There was no more objection that he could think of, now.

“I won’t,” he promised rashly. “I won’t leave. Not as long as I am alive. I swear it on my love for you.”

And then, witnessing the joy that bloomed in her eyes, knowing that there was no more reason to hesitate or hold back, he dipped his head and captured her lips in a searing kiss, and it was everything he could have hoped for and more. It was so much better than kissing in a genjutsu, better than that one kiss he’d given her back at Akatsuki headquarters, because this was real, and this was out of love, and this was reciprocated. She pressed her body to his as closely as she could as she returned his kiss eagerly, and Itachi’s hands stroked the curves of her body, down her back all the way down to her delightful behind.

All his doubts, all his worries, evaporated like early morning fog dissipated under a scorching sun. There was only him, and Sakura. This moment was for them and for their love, and he would not sully it thinking of anything except her pleasure.

She broke apart from his kiss, and led him to the bed. It was small, and Itachi wished they’d done this back at Akatsuki headquarters, that they could have had their first time in a luxurious bed so he could worship her as she deserved. But as she sat him down and straddled his lap, he found himself thinking that they could be anywhere in the world, and their coupling would still be everything he could hope for, because it would be with Sakura.

“Itachi,” she breathed, rocking against him in desperation. “Please, if we’re not going to go all the way, don’t get my hopes up. I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“I know,” he groaned. “I was listening, that time you were pleasuring yourself. I wanted you so much, but I was forced to settle for eavesdropping on the beautiful sounds you were making.”

She flushed, but he saw a glimpse of mischief in her eyes. "Show me," she whispered. "Show me all the things you wanted to do to me."

His queen commanded him, and he had no choice but to obey. He kissed her again, drinking in her heady scent. He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her nose, her forehead even, as she giggled and jerked in his arms.

"Itachi!" she squealed. "That's not what I meant!"

"But that's all I want. To taste every inch of your skin."

"Then may I suggest you start here instead?" she laughed, and unzipped her vest and shrugged out of it. Itachi moved to begin unwinding her bindings, and realized that the dark cloth looked oddly familiar. As he studied it, her cheeks grew pink.

"That would be your shirt that I destroyed that first night," she said sheepishly. "I do have my own bindings back, but it just felt nice having something of yours against me."

"I did wonder where it went," he murmured, but found no trace of the irritation he'd felt when he'd first realized it was missing. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"I will give you as many of my shirts as you wish to have," he added on. He found that it was rather pleasing to think of her wearing his clothing. He would give them all to her before he died, he decided.

"Later, maybe," she replied, and her meaning was very clear indeed. He finished unwinding the cloth, and simply stared hungrily. To his shame, he had imagined how her nude body would look a few times, but nothing could truly match the reality of just how beautiful she was. His hands came up, gently fondling her breasts. He could caress the soft flesh all day, he thought, and it appeared Sakura agreed, as her breathing grew ragged with anticipation.

He then took a breast into his mouth, swirling his tongue and laving attention onto it, his hands stroking the smooth, toned flesh of her stomach, and the way she rolled her hips against his sent a thrill of satisfaction through him.

More.

He wanted to watch her come apart, over and over. He wanted to hear her cries and moans.

Just as he moved, intending to lavish attention onto her other breast, she took hold of his shoulders, and gently pushed him back.

“Not yet,” she said. “It’s my turn now.”

She tugged at the hem of his shirt, and he allowed her to pull it off. She shoved him back onto the bed and climbed on top of him, kissing his neck and running her hands up and down his chest.

And then, her hands wandered lower, and lower, and she pulled the waistband of his pants and underwear down, lifted him, and was taking him into her mouth. He wanted to say no, to tell her that he wanted to see to her pleasure first, but then she looked up at him, her eyes burning with lust, and he was lost.

Then she was sucking on him, licking him, her hands caressing what her mouth couldn’t reach, and Itachi felt himself nearing completion, about to feel the sheer ecstasy of cumming in her mouth, when she *stopped*, and pulled her mouth off him, and gave his sensitive head a kiss, as if to intensify his torture.

“Sakura,” he groaned.

She smiled sweetly at him. “That’s your punishment for trying to leave me,” she said, smirking, and he understood, and he was about to apologize for the hurt he’d surely caused her, when her cheeks turned that delightful shade of pink he loved.

“That, and...” her smile turned sheepish. “I wanted the first time I made you cum to be inside me, and you seemed like you were going to take a while to get there,” she admitted, and Itachi was falling in love all over again. She was no shrinking flower, and she knew exactly what she wanted.

She pulled off her shorts and skirt, and Itachi hurriedly dealt with his remaining clothes as well. She climbed back on him, and Itachi immediately rolled them over.

“Can’t handle the thought of me on top?” she teased.

“Of course,” he laughed, almost in wonder at how joyful he felt with her. He felt much lighter than he had in years, as if he’d shed all the burdens he’d been carrying on his shoulders. “I am absolutely terrified that you’ll leave me hanging at the last moment again.”

“There’s a simple answer to that, really,” she cooed. “You’d just have

to get me so turned on that I wouldn't *want* to stop."

"Is that so, Haruno-sama? Then I'd better get started," he murmured, and pressed his lips to her neck, her collarbones, her shoulders, eager to continue his exploration of her body. He trailed kisses down her chest, past her stomach, and her hands twisted in his hair as he moved lower. Then, he parted her legs, and her fleshy pink lips were revealed to him. She was so utterly wet, and it was all for *him*. He immediately set to work lapping at her juices, and she immediately expressed her satisfaction, mewling in pleasure.

He paused, lifting his head to behold her, with her flushed body and her mouth wide open as she panted. She jerked under him, clearly impatient for him to return his attentions to her clit, but he simply pressed her thighs down and activated his Sharingan, realizing that for the first time in years, the pain that accompanied its activation was absent. He memorized the sight of her, of her desire.

"I love you," he said softly, pressing a kiss to her thigh before his tongue delved back between her slit, utterly focused on drinking her sweet nectar, his fingers playing with her clit. As she quivered around him, her thighs clenching and holding his head tightly to her, he knew that heaven for him was right here, between Sakura's thighs.

"Itachi," she moaned. "Please, I... I want you inside me. Now."

He paused again, then. "Soon, my love," he promised, enjoying the sound of those words on his tongue. It felt so freeing to be able to openly acknowledge how deeply he felt for her. To not need to hide it anymore.

"Please, Itachi," she begged. "I want both of us to cum together for our first time."

And he found that he could not refuse her, not when she put it that way. He placed one more kiss between her legs before he climbed on top of her. He lined himself up, and she guided him inside her, and they both groaned as he entered, slowly sinking into her. And then, he bottomed out inside her, and she clenched around him, and he forced himself to wait for her to adjust to him.

"Fuck," he moaned, not even caring how vulgar he was being. "You feel amazing."

Her eyes sparkled. "I would have fucked you *days* ago if I'd known that's what it would take to make you curse," she teased.

He slowly began rocking his hips then, and she wrapped her legs around him, holding him close. "Yes, Itachi," she sighed. "More."

She was incredible, Itachi realized, as he quickened his pace and she continued to meet his thrusts, her nails digging into his shoulders. Their foreheads pressed together as they continued to rock into each other. Had he thought he was in heaven before? This, this was it - this feeling of oneness, with her eyes staring into his, mesmerizing him, leaving him utterly at her mercy.

She finally reached her climax, clenching around him, and he allowed himself to let go as the shockwaves of his orgasm rippled through his body. He kissed her on her cheeks, her lips, her neck, her shoulders, anywhere he could reach, wanting to show her just how much she meant to him, how much he treasured her. He could hardly believe that he'd almost walked away from her, that he'd almost consigned himself to a life without knowing the sheer bliss that was their joining.

"I love you too," she whispered, cupping his face.

And Itachi was complete.

Chapter End Notes

Well. I went through an absolute emotional roller coaster writing that chapter, and I'm sure you guys did reading it too. Anyways, I'm going to take a break from updating this story for the next two weeks, especially since we've reached a natural pause. I'm going to be pretty busy with work over the next couple of weeks, and I'll do my best to find time to write and update sooner, but the likelihood is that updates will only resume in August.

Uncomfortable Truths

Chapter Notes

And we're back!!! This hiatus stretched longer than I expected because work's been a total bitch and this chapter was also a difficult one for me to write (I always struggle with the emotional hangover after a big scene). Not a lot of action in this one, but I think we definitely needed the break after the avalanche that was the last few chapters!

Anyway, hope you guys enjoy! Thanks much to everyone who left comments, and also all the amazing people who introduced me to writing sprints - they're the reason this chapter managed to get written today!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura lay on the bed with Itachi's face buried in the crook of her neck, listening to his deep breaths. His body was still exhausted from his near-death experience and subsequent healing, and he'd fallen asleep soon after their... coupling. A goofy smile spread across her face as she considered it.

She had slept with Itachi.

And damn if it wasn't the best sex she'd ever had. Granted, a large majority of her experiences had been lukewarm ones with targets on honeypot missions, but *still*. Itachi had been an amazingly attentive lover, and he'd been almost entirely focused on ensuring she found her pleasure. But beyond that, the experience of getting to know his body, learning how to coax those groans out of him, learning how to make him *swear*, had been utterly mind-blowing.

She ran her fingers through his hair, enjoying the sensation of his soft and silky tresses against her fingers. He'd liked it when she'd done that earlier, she remembered, a blush spreading across her face as she recalled how Itachi had *purred* at feeling her nails on his scalp.

As she brought her arms back around his shoulders, holding his body to hers, she couldn't stop the niggling doubt that was raging at the back of her head. Nobody she had begged to stay ever had. Sasuke had knocked her out and left her on a bench. Naruto had given her a cheerful grin and told her to wait for him because he'd be back.

Kakashi-sensei had patted her on the head and told her she'd do better without him. And her father had apologized, said the pain was too much to bear.

The anxiety grew within her, steadily chewing away at her feelings of joy and completeness. What if it was all some kind of trick? Though in the moment, she'd just felt overwhelming relief that she'd gotten through to him, that he was finally listening to her, now, she wondered if he'd capitulated too easily.

Nobody had ever chosen to stay with her. Everyone had left. What made her so sure that Itachi would be the one to stay? And for *her*? She was pretty enough, she knew, and the fact that he'd been willing to sacrifice himself for her spoke volumes about how deeply he must care for her.

Am I worth dying for, but not staying for?

When she'd asked him that, she hadn't been trying to guilt-trip him, to force him to reconsider his decision. She'd genuinely believed it. After all, who would stay for weak, forgettable, Sakura, when they had dreams and ambitions of their own to pursue?

Almost reflexively, her arms tightened around his shoulders. He had a plan. She knew it. Itachi wasn't the kind of person to leave things to chance, nor to leave himself at the mercy of others' wishes. She had no illusions that his love meant he would willingly surrender his goals for her. Notwithstanding the fact that shinobi were trained to place their mission objectives at a higher priority than their loved ones, she *knew* Itachi. Knew the stubborn ass that he was. He wouldn't give in so easily.

She ran her hands down his back, distracting herself from her thoughts with enjoying the feeling of his muscles under her palms. It was amazing, how much illness had lay hidden underneath his lean muscle, his body an instrument and weapon honed to perfection. She frowned as she considered it. She'd initially thought he had been resistant to allowing her to heal him because he'd had a technique that he'd kept hidden within his body, and that part of him still held back from trusting her entirely. She didn't hold that against him – once she'd learned to heal herself, she'd become rather leery of allowing anyone apart from Tsunade-shishou or Shizune to lay a hand on her.

But she hadn't found anything of the sort within him. No hidden

techniques, no strategically disguised cavities for storage, no seals, nothing. All he'd really managed to hide from her had been the level of medical care he'd been in need of –

At that moment, her thoughts came to a screeching halt as she considered the offhand observation, and knew it for truth.

He'd been concealing his need for healing from her.

He despised himself for everything he had done.

The pieces came together almost automatically, even though she wanted to deny it, as if denying it would make it untrue.

“Oh, kami,” she whispered, relieved that he was deeply asleep, that he wouldn't hear the realization she came to. “You want to die, Itachi. That's why you didn't want me to heal you. That's why you were so angry with me after you woke up. You wanted to die, and I ruined your plan.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as she considered the horrifying possibility. Could it be true? Could he truly... She couldn't even bring herself to think it. She'd been resigned to death, yes, but that had been a product of her capture, and her inability to see a way out of the situation. Even then, she'd wanted to fight, to live.

She recalled how he'd held her as he wept on the anniversary of the massacre. How he'd trembled after she'd forced him to relive it.

No, she supposed she was not surprised that he wanted to die.

I won't leave. Not as long as I am alive. I swear it on my love for you.

She knew Itachi was not the sort of person to break a promise. But she also couldn't deny that he was the sort of person to find a loophole within his promises. He wouldn't stay with her. He would die, and he would leave her, just like her father had chosen to die.

But if Sakura had anything to say about it, Itachi would live. He would live, and he would find purpose in his life apart from serving a village that condemned him and told stories of him to frighten young children.

Thankful that he slept so deeply, she untangled herself from him and got up from the bed. She was racing against time, and she was working against Itachi. She knew for herself how intelligent he was,

and how easily he could out-manuever her. The only advantage she had was that Itachi was unlikely to deliberately commit suicide – he seemed to favour a reckless sacrifice as his mode of death.

She bent over him, and placed a kiss to his cheek. He stirred slightly, and stilled again as sleep claimed his fatigued body once more.

“I’ll save you, Itachi,” she promised. “Even from yourself. I swear it on my love for you.”

Tsunade once again found herself standing at her window, deep in contemplation. Nothing had changed since she’d first stood at that same position and in that same pose, around three weeks ago, as she’d awaited news from the tracking team on Sakura’s status. Sakura was still missing, and Tsunade was still helpless to do anything to rescue her apprentice.

Her fist clenched, crumpling the notification she held in her hands further. The rescue team dispatched from Kumo had been unsuccessful. How they’d managed to eliminate an Akatsuki said to have the chakra reserves equal to a tailed beast but failed in retrieving a ninja who would *want* to come with them was beyond her.

Nothing had changed, and yet, everything had changed.

She remembered how she’d spent those first days after Sakura’s capture itching for just a drop of sake to dull the pain and her fears. How she’d never thought she could make it through a single day. And now, the craving to numb the sharper edges of her emotions with alcohol was a distant buzzing in her mind, easily ignored and dismissed.

Whoever had said you couldn’t teach an old dog new tricks had clearly never met Senju Tsunade. Never known just how stubborn she could be when it came to the people she loved. She may have failed to protect Dan and Nawaki, but she still had Sakura and Shizune, who were daughters to her in every single way that mattered.

She turned her thoughts back to Sakura, and considered the report Katsuyu had given the last time she’d summoned the slug. She was forced to admit that Sakura might not have been as willing to go with the Kumo nin as she’d assumed.

She’d been shocked beyond belief when Katsuyu had informed her that Sakura had summoned her to heal Uchiha Itachi, and that she’d

been frantic as she'd worked over him, expending far more of her chakra to heal him than would be considered safe. If Tsunade had Sakura in front of her at that moment, she would have given her a good scolding her apprentice would not be quick to forget.

Sighing, she was forced to confront yet another uncomfortable truth.

Knowing Sakura as she did, she knew what her actions, what Katsuyu's assessment of her mental state, meant.

Her apprentice must have fallen for the Uchiha.

Tsunade cursed the entire Uchiha clan and their good looks, their self-absorbed nature, and their inability to *leave her apprentice's heart intact*. Oh, Itachi might very well be on Konoha's side – Sakura's mind was razor-sharp and Tsunade trusted her judgement – but whether he was worthy of Sakura's heart was an entirely different matter.

If he'd truly been Konoha's double-agent within the Akatsuki, it meant he'd been a competent enough actor to fool the entire world for ten years. Who knew what thoughts and feelings had been brewing in his mind in that time? Who knew what resentment might have grown within him?

What if he saw seducing the Hokage's apprentice as a path to revenge for what he had been through? What if he managed to turn Sakura against Konoha?

Tsunade hurried back to her desk and smoothed out the missive and re-read it, as if reading it for a tenth time would change its contents.

Mission unsuccessful. Two casualties. Four injured. Akatsuki member Hoshigaki Kisame eliminated. Unknown Akatsuki member (female with blue hair) and Uchiha Itachi escaped, presumably with custody of Haruno Sakura.

This was what came of entrusting such a mission to another shinobi village, Tsunade grouched. Not only had they failed, the damned Raikage was being bloody uncooperative as usual, refusing to provide her with any sort of detail. She didn't even know if the Kumo nin had laid eyes on Sakura.

And so, in return, Tsunade had her own petty revenge. Katsuyu had observed that the blue haired Akatsuki was dead, had seen Sakura prepping her body for autopsy while the slug had been working on healing the Uchiha. Tsunade didn't bother telling the Raikage. Served

him right.

Patient. She had to be patient. The blue haired Akatsuki was the sensor Sakura had mentioned in her last report before she'd left the Akatsuki base. Sakura would report in soon. If Uchiha Itachi hadn't turned Sakura against Tsunade by then.

In the meantime, the council's interfering be damned. Tsunade had learned the hard way that it was easier to beg forgiveness than to seek permission, and that there was no point relying on a foreign power to help their own people.

She needed Konoha nin. And she knew just who to summon.

Kakashi felt decidedly odd as he knocked on the Hokage's door. He hadn't entered the Hokage's office by this route in *years*, preferring to climb in through the window.

But then, it had also been years since he'd bothered to be punctual for anything less than a life-or-death situation. He wasn't sure if Tsunade would be ready to receive him, given that he'd normally only have arrived two hours later, and he didn't want to walk in on her passed out over her desk or anything equally awkward.

He exhaled as he heard her instruction for him to enter. He'd started arriving late all those years ago as a tribute to Obito. Yet, ever since Sakura's capture, he'd been haunted by thoughts of what an irresponsible sensei he'd been – more so than when Sasuke had defected. He'd known in his heart of hearts that there was little help for Sasuke. There was only so much you could compel someone who didn't want to stay, and Kakashi was his teacher and commander, not his mother.

But Sakura... If he'd been with Team Seven, teaching them and honing their skills instead of standing in front of the cenotaph, would it have given her the edge she needed to escape the Akatsuki?

The rational part of his mind told him it was unlikely, that she'd blossomed more under Tsunade-sama's tutelage than she would ever have under his more scattered approach. But his heart insisted that he was to blame.

And so, he tossed aside years of tradition. If there was a higher power, if he could show that he'd repented of his mistakes, perhaps it might aid them. Perhaps not. But it was not a risk he could bring himself to

take.

He went in, and Tsunade glanced up at him, and he almost did a double-take. Her eyes were clear, and her cheeks showed no signs of being flushed.

Was she so unaffected by Sakura's capture?

And then, he took in the scene around him. There was no scent of alcohol anywhere in the room. There were no bottles anywhere to be seen either – nothing on her shelves, no emptied bottles in her waste bin.

He met her eyes, and knew then that she must have gone through the same thoughts he had. That if only she'd been better, more responsible, perhaps a joyous girl who had meant so much to them both would be safely home.

"Sit, Kakashi," she said.

He sighed. She only ever asked him to sit when there was unpleasant news to be given. Still, he dragged a chair out and situated himself onto it.

"You are aware that you are my chosen successor," she began without ceremony, and Kakashi almost groaned out loud. He'd fought hard against her decision to name him the next Hokage should anything happen to her, and she'd won that battle by asking if he'd prefer to call Danzō 'Hokage-sama'. Kakashi had capitulated quickly after that. The Slug Princess could take a man out in one hit verbally as well as with her fists, he'd learned from that encounter.

"I pray for your continued health, Hokage-sama," he replied in turn. And he sincerely did. Being Hokage would severely cut down on the time he had to read his beloved *Icha Icha*.

"You damn brat," Tsunade muttered. "I'm bringing this up now because it concerns Sakura."

At that, Kakashi sat up from his slouch, attention focusing on his leader. "What about Sakura?" he demanded, and then realized how he must sound. "Hokage-sama," he added.

Tsunade's hand moved as if to grab a bottle, before she appeared to realize there wasn't any liquor on her desk. She interlaced her fingers instead, and fixed him with a serious look. "The Council of Elders

went behind my back to speak with the Daimyo. I have been ordered not to send any rescue missions for Sakura.”

Kakashi felt his hackles rise. “No wonder Naruto and I were ordered not to assist,” he muttered. It had taken all of his self-control not to go against his orders. Especially when the signal for Naruto to pull the Kumo nin back to Mount Myōboku had not been activated, and they knew that the rescue mission must have gone terribly wrong. It had taken even more restraint to persuade Naruto not to act against orders. He’d been sorely tempted to just let Naruto be his usual impulsive self and plead that he was incapable of controlling the jinchuriki. Only the knowledge that his leader must have had a reason to order them to stay out of combat had kept both of them leashed.

She nodded. “Kumo is being remarkably opaque with what did happen during that mission. All they will tell me is that Hoshigaki Kisame is dead and that Uchiha Itachi evaded capture with Sakura.”

Kakashi felt a surge of rage pass through him at the thought of the man he’d once considered a favoured subordinate. He’d taken Itachi under his wing, promised him he’d protect him. And Itachi had repaid it with violence.

Tsunade went on, ignoring his scowl. “I’ve decided that Sakura’s safety matters more than my position. Especially given that I have a capable successor in mind. You will lead the next mission to retrieve Sakura and bring her home.”

Joy and relief warred with trepidation and worry. “But if I lead the mission, won’t the Elders – “ he began.

“They won’t,” Tsunade replied sharply, and Kakashi was reminded of why so many had been more than willing to overlook her years away from the village. She was a force to be reckoned with, indeed. “After all, you would hardly be privy to the workings of the council. All you would know was that your Hokage assigned you a mission, and that you would be a fool to refuse it.”

He nodded. “Hai, Hokage-sama,” he responded, hoping she could hear the sheer gratitude within him. He finally had a chance to atone for his mistakes.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she muttered, and she rubbed her forehead wearily. “There are many things you’re unaware of, Kakashi. Things I myself didn’t know about my own damn village until recently. And if you’re going to take over from me once the council takes action on me

for disobeying an order from the Daimyo, and if you're going to have a chance in hell of succeeding on this mission, you'd better know these things too."

As she spoke, Kakashi found himself becoming more and more agitated as everything he thought he'd known was turned on its head. A conspiracy in Konoha's leadership? There being more to the Uchiha massacre than Itachi going insane, and him being a double agent for Konoha to boot? Sakura having put all the pieces together?

He'd known she was the most intelligent and the most capable of looking underneath the underneath among his three cute little genin, but for her to have figured out a mystery that had stumped the jounin of Konoha for over a decade spoke to her capability, and Kakashi again had to confront how he'd failed her.

And then, just as he'd thought he couldn't feel any more horrible about himself, Tsunade broke the news.

"They suspect," she said softly, "that this man who is truly leading the Akatsuki from the shadows... is Uchiha Obito."

Kakashi stood, uncaring of how his sudden movement knocked the chair over. "No. That's impossible. Obito's dead. He died a hero."

Tsunade gently shook her head. "I relooked into the records of the mission of Kannabi Bridge after Sakura conveyed her suspicions to me. You were forced to leave him behind as he was dying, but his death was never truly confirmed, yes?"

He knew she didn't mean it as a rebuke, but it still stung. *Those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum.*

As if he'd needed further confirmation of where he stood. He nodded, shakily. Obito, alive?

He felt another stab of regret then, for all the time he'd stood in front of the cenotaph.

And then, another thought occurred to him. Obito was alive. Obito was alive, and *he hadn't returned home*. Obito was alive, and he'd *killed* and plotted against Konoha nin. His own comrades. Never mind that Obito was incapable of plotting in the first place, given how he'd always worn his intentions and emotions on his sleeve.

No. There was no way this could be true. Obito, who had taught him

the importance of teamwork? Obito, who had been stupidly self-sacrificing to a fault? There was no way this was possible, and Kakashi told Tsunade so.

She shook her head again, and he almost felt an urge to strike at her, to wipe that compassionate look off her face. What did she know, anyway? She had never met Obito. She didn't know him like Kakashi did.

"Kakashi," she said quietly. "I know this must be difficult for you. I grappled with the same thing when I heard that Orochimaru murdered our sensei in cold blood."

Shame poured into him, then. How had he forgotten? If there was one person who would know what this revelation would feel like, it would be Tsunade herself.

"I do not say this to humiliate you," she went on, somehow correctly interpreting his mood from the minute movements of his single eye that was visible. "I simply want you to know that I empathize. But facts cannot be denied. I checked against the records of every Uchiha. There are few who died outside the village, and fewer whose bodies were never retrieved. And given the nature of his injuries, and his missing right eye – "

At that, Kakashi stopped listening. He couldn't. Doujutsu theft was something that happened frequently enough. And yet, it was highly unlikely that someone who stole a doujutsu would take only one eye, leaving the other behind. Even unlikely that the person it had been stolen from would have been left alive.

So for a living Uchiha to only have one Sharingan... they would have had to give the eye away willingly. As Obito had given his eye to Kakashi all those years ago.

He sank to his knees, then. He wanted to cry, to scream, to rage to the heavens. But he couldn't. All his training, his years of practice in containing his emotional expression kicked in, and he was left staring vacantly at the floor.

Obito was alive, and he had taken Sakura. Obito was alive, and he wanted to take Naruto as well.

Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum.

Your actions name you as both, Obito. Both scum, and worse than scum.

He somehow found the strength to lift his head, and looked into his Hokage's eyes, and the combination of empathy and resolve he saw within almost broke him. Somehow, his leader still trusted him. Even though he knew with a glaring certainty that it was his actions that had led to whatever Obito had become.

If he'd only been quicker to decide to rescue Rin, if he'd been more careful, and hadn't compromised his own skills by losing his eye, forcing Obito to sacrifice himself to save him, perhaps none of this would have happened. He was the root of this issue, and it was up to him to resolve this mess.

"Hatake Kakashi, I hereby assign you the mission to track and retrieve the kunoichi Haruno Sakura. If possible, you are to also retrieve the shinobi Uchiha Itachi and Uchiha Obito. You will be allowed to choose your own team, and you will depart by the end of today. Do you accept the mission?"

Atonement, he thought to himself again. This was his chance to right his wrongs from the past. "Hai, Hokage-sama. I accept the mission. I will not return to Konoha without Sakura."

Chapter End Notes

This is where I apologize again because I'm moving house next month! Great news for me because I'm getting out of a toxic environment, but I'll be pretty busy with the logistics of it so updates will continue to be a bit sporadic for a while. Once things settle down a bit, we'll (hopefully) get back to the regular update schedule!

Wishes

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to all the good vibes on the previous chapter! You guys are great, and really motivate me to keep on writing.

Mild NSFW in this chapter - just some hints of citrus.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The man who called himself Pain stared into the flames. How easy it would be, he reflected, to take that flame out of its safe containment in the fireplace, and make it spread. End himself. End everything.

His entire purpose over the past years had been to reunite Yahiko and Konan. Oh, he said his aim was peace, but that had been Yahiko's dream. Nagato had simply wanted to see the two people he loved most in the world happy, together.

There was no hope for him. There had never been hope for him. Pain was a fitting name for him, for that was all that had filled his soul since he'd witnessed his parents being senselessly killed. There had been moments of joy, of course, but all of that was because of Yahiko and Konan. Only them.

There had been a time he'd thought Jiraiya-sensei could be part of his dreams as well, but those thoughts had crumbled with Yahiko's death. Jiraiya-sensei was well-intended, but he'd filled their heads with visions of a peace that fundamentally could not exist in reality. How could it, when people held conflicting desires? How could it, when one person's dream was another's nightmare?

And so, when Madara had proposed his Tsuki no Me plan, Nagato had been all for it. If Konan could meet Yahiko and live with him again in the Infinite Tsukuyomi Madara had described, he could die peacefully. For he himself had no dreams, nobody he wished to meet again. He simply wanted the pain to end.

He looked again into his hands, where the stone which had been linked to Konan's ring lay without its customary glow, no longer illuminating the world with its soft white light. It would remain dull until the ring was bound to another. When the white light had gone out, so had all of Pain's interest in carrying out Madara's plan. All that was left was vengeance.

His eyes passed over Kisame's yellow stone, similarly dulled, and came to rest on Itachi's vermillion. It still glowed, though the light had almost flickered out a few times three days ago, at the same time the light had gone out of Konan's. And each time he activated the stone over the previous days, Itachi's location had been in the same direction and the same distance away. He hadn't moved.

He would give Itachi a little more time, Pain decided. A few more days to recover from his injuries, such as they must be. If Itachi had not reported in by the end of the week, or if he went on the move before reporting in with a satisfactory explanation, he would go track the man down himself, and hold him accountable for Konan's death.

Itachi dismissed his summons and ripped open the envelope with unnatural haste. He was normally more sedate, but never before had he gone so long without an update on his brother. His informants sent daily updates which were picked up by his crows. But between being closely trailed by Konan and his collapse, it had been well over a week since he had reviewed the status reports. He began with the latest one, intending to quickly work his way backward before Sakura returned to their room.

A few seconds later, the very first note he had opened fluttered to the table, dropped from trembling hands.

Orochimaru was dead. Sasuke was on the move.

He began mentally calculating the distance between Oto and the little outpost near Lightning's border that he and Sakura currently were in. At Itachi's own speed, he could probably cover the distance in two days. At Sasuke's presumably slower pace, and hindered by the need to track Itachi, it would probably take him a week at most.

He exhaled slowly. One week. One more week to be with Sakura.

In spite of himself, he felt his eyes stinging. He'd spent *years* waiting for Sasuke to kill him. And now, just when he'd thought he could find a measure of happiness for himself, a final few months of joy with the woman he loved, he learned the day of his death.

One more week.

He felt Sakura's chakra returning then, and hastily rubbed his eyes and destroyed the status reports with a fire jutsu. It would not do to leave them intact, and in any case, the older reports would not tell

him much of interest. Not now that Sasuke was actively looking for him.

Sakura was far cannier than he'd given her credit for, and he would not put it past her to discover his intentions. He would previously have insisted that his resolve would be strong enough to finish what he'd begun all those years ago. But that was before Sakura had chipped away at his defenses, leaving him helpless to resist the life she offered him.

She entered the room with sparkling eyes, and Itachi felt a rush of emotion again at being able to see her so clearly, to be able to behold her expressive face with such ease. She was swinging a basket as she entered.

"We've both basically been cooped up in this little room for the past three days, so I thought we could go out for a picnic, get some fresh air," she laughed.

His heart tightened. Before he'd received the news, it would have sounded absolutely perfect. Now, though, a phantom part of him wondered how late his intelligence was, whether Sasuke had already tracked him all the way to the Land of Lightning, whether Sasuke would burst in to attack in the middle of their picnic.

He cursed himself for not waiting to read the report. He should have. He could have enjoyed the afternoon with Sakura.

No matter how long you'd waited, it would never be enough, the rational part of his mind whispered, and he knew it for truth. He'd already had the most blissful experience he could have with Sakura. He'd given himself completely over to his desires the previous night, and she'd shared herself with him as well. At least that had been unsullied by his knowledge of his fated battle with his brother.

He found himself tugging on her wrist, pulling her onto his lap. She dropped the basket on the floor with a gasp.

"Itachi, what –" she began, but he did not allow her to finish before he cupped her chin and pulled her in for a kiss. It was nothing like the kisses they'd shared the night before, full of possibility and hope. He claimed her lips with desperation, with the knowledge that every touch, every caress could be the final one he would ever again give to her.

She returned his attentions eagerly, but when he moved to press his

lips to her graceful neck, she placed her hands on his cheeks and met his eyes.

“Itachi?” she asked softly. “What’s wrong?”

He almost trembled with the effort to keep all his emotions locked up inside. She’d known him a scant three weeks, and in that time, she’d already become so adept at reading him.

“Nothing,” he said, hoping she would not hear the lie. “I simply missed you.”

“I was only gone for an hour, and you were still asleep when I left,” she laughed.

“It was too long anyway,” he murmured, and buried his face in her hair, breathing in the scents he loved so much. If he only had a week left with her, he would make the most of it, he vowed. There was no more point in thinking about making his excuses to Akatsuki, or in calculating his next steps. All that mattered now was ensuring she knew she was loved, and that she would believe that he had not left her willingly.

He would simply have to put on a good performance for Sasuke, make it believable that he’d died at his hands. And ensure that even if Sakura revealed her discoveries to Sasuke, she would not be believed. He hated to think of diminishing her in any way, of destroying the credibility she had worked so hard to cultivate. And yet... this was the only way.

Something had changed in the short hour Sakura had been gone. She’d thought she’d have a little more time to figure out how she could plan to keep Itachi alive and with her. She was sure that as long as she kept him away from dangerous situations, she would have some breathing room to gather information and lay her plans. She’d barely even gotten started, having sent a message to her shishou to re-open the investigation into the Uchiha clan massacre.

And now, as she walked beside him, his hand lightly resting on the small of her back, her gnawing certainty increased. Itachi was not a demonstrative person by nature – every single time he’d shown her affection previously had been because she’d bullied him into it. Even in private, his displays of affection were mostly limited to kisses, and he almost never touched her anywhere other than her face unless she guided him to it. Even when they’d had sex, he’d followed her lead.

So for him to willingly initiate this sort of intimacy, and in public? It reminded Sakura of her experiences with patients with terminal illness.

It reminded her of her father.

She and her mother been so relieved that he finally seemed to have snapped out of his melancholy, that he'd stopped withdrawing into himself and was reaching out again. He'd started laughing again, making terrible jokes, singing off-key, and cooking extravagant meals. Sakura had nursed hopes that he'd found the determination to keep fighting for life, to persist through the ups and downs as she and Tsunade-shishou desperately searched for a cure.

And then, she'd been summoned to her shishou's office one day. She'd thought there was good news, thought there had been a breakthrough. And then, shishou had quietly handed her a form. Haruno Kizashi's paperwork requesting for euthanasia.

She swallowed at the unpleasant memory.

And now, Itachi seemed to be travelling down the same road. He'd been so stiff when she'd walked in, and he'd *lied* to her, told her everything was alright, said he'd just missed her. He hadn't let go of her again ever since she'd walked into their room at the inn. He'd kissed her, caressed her, stared at her with his Sharingan as if he was trying to memorize the sight of her.

And she didn't say a word.

She didn't know how long she could keep up the ruse that she believed everything was alright. Deception was not her strong point, damn it. She was used to wearing her feelings on her sleeve. And she refused to even consider creating another persona to handle this for her. It would feel wrong. Itachi was not her mission. And just because he thought it was okay to lie to her did not mean Sakura felt the same.

And so, she plastered a smile on her face, she laughed and teased, and pretended she didn't see the pain in Itachi's eyes that he didn't entirely succeed in hiding.

"Tell me about your childhood," Itachi said suddenly.

"My childhood?" Sakura asked, surprised by the sudden topic. Itachi usually preferred to sit in silence, or to talk about impersonal things.

More evidence in favour of her conclusion that he was planning for his death, she thought sadly.

“Aa,” he replied, putting his chopsticks aside to wrap his arms around her. He dipped his head to nose along her collarbone, and Sakura felt a shiver go through her.

“Itachi, if you want to talk, then maybe you shouldn’t be doing that,” she chided, trying and failing to keep a stern tone.

He looked up at her innocently, and Sakura dearly wished she could enjoy this moment where he was so present with her, so free, without worrying about what he was planning. “Doing what?” he asked, and his lips twitched before he returned his attentions to her neck, his hands clasping her waist.

Sakura sputtered. “*That*,” she said, and granted, she knew it was not her most articulate moment, but she still felt indignant at his laugh.

“Do you mean this?” he asked, and nipped lightly at her neck. And then did it again.

“Or this?” he asked, his hands coming up cradle her breasts, teasing thumbs stroking her nipples over her vest.

And Sakura dearly wanted to push him off and pummel him to teach him a lesson about teasing her, but the part of her that was so desperately in love, that just wanted to be wrong about her conclusions, that just wanted to believe that there was a happy ending for them, wanted to enjoy his attentions.

Screw it, she thought. She could figure out what he was planning later. For now, she was done being baited by him.

“No,” she said breathily, and he looked up at her again, eyebrow cocked in interest. “I mean *this*.” Her hands went straight to his crotch, fondling the bulge that was slowly growing there. It was a good thing winter was approaching, she thought in a corner of her mind. It virtually guaranteed them privacy in the frozen clearing they were picnicking in.

Itachi groaned, and Sakura smirked in triumph. But it only lasted a moment before he pushed her onto her back and positioned himself on top of her, his body pinning hers to the ground and his bangs blocking her peripheral vision so that all she could see was his face.

“That wasn’t very nice of you, Sakura,” he said roughly.

She snorted. “Good, because I wasn’t trying to be.”

“Oh?” he murmured.

“Mmhm,” she replied breezily, trying to act as if she was sitting in a parlour enjoying tea with a casual acquaintance. Not pinned on the cold ground with only a thin blanket for protection from the frost, and his very warm body on top of hers, his velvety tones doing *things* to her insides. “Besides, you started it. I was just getting payback.”

“Is that so?” he replied, and then proceeded to lick her *ear*. She squealed at the ticklish sensation. He smirked, and kissed the shell of that same ear, and proceeded to suck gently on it. Sakura squirmed underneath him, trying to get away from the sensation.

“Stop, Itachi, please!” she giggled, doing her best to wiggle out from under him.

He laughed, and pressed a kiss to her *nose*, of all things. Really, she didn’t understand how he could enjoy paying so much attention to the least romantic parts of her. “If you wanted me to stop, then your movements are the exact opposite of what they should be, my love,” he purred, and Sakura felt like she could die a happy woman in that moment, between that *voice*, the lust darkening his eyes, and how he’d addressed her as *his love*.

And then immediately winced at her poorly worded thoughts. She wouldn’t be dying any time soon, but Itachi planned on it for himself.

He noticed, and his face softened with concern. He rolled off her, and pulled her close to him so she was tucked into his side. He didn’t ask about what had upset her, but simply held her. Sakura wondered if her inability to conceal her feelings had already betrayed her thoughts to him, if he realized she was on to him.

Again, the thought of simply *asking* him crossed her mind. She deliberated on it for a moment, and discarded the idea. Itachi was like a wild animal in so many ways, liable to panic if you approached directly. But his asking about her childhood meant he was open to actually talking. She would start with her genuine feelings, she decided, and see where the conversation took them.

She reached up and gently stroked his cheek, and his eyes fell shut, and she could see his enjoyment of the simple touch. “I still can’t

believe this is real,” she admitted. “That someone like you would even look at someone like me. Let alone care as much as you do.”

He opened his eyes, and smiled wryly. “I could say the same to you, a thousand times over,” he said quietly. He clasped the hand that was stroking his face and interlaced their fingers. “That someone as bright and full of life as you would want me, the lowest sort of criminal, especially after all the suffering my actions have caused you.”

“Your actions may have started the avalanche,” she acknowledged. “But in the end, Sasuke made his own choices. And I can’t blame you for that.”

“Can’t you?” he murmured, his black eyes piercing in their intensity, as if they could read every thought that had ever passed through her mind. “One would think having your entire family murdered by someone you trusted and looked up to, and being tortured by that same person, would be rather blameworthy. You have also expressed similar sentiments, though not in the same words.”

“I did. But I can’t shake the thought that you had a good reason for doing what you did. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking, maybe it’s me trying to convince myself I can’t possibly love someone evil. But I don’t think so.” She sighed then, desperately wanting to know, and yet, knowing he would not give her an answer. “But you won’t tell me, will you?”

“Forgive me, Sakura,” he said quietly. “Maybe next time.”

She smiled thinly. “And that’s why I have trouble believing that this is real. Because I look at you, and even as I see the quiet, kind, man I fell for, I wonder if I even really know you, or if I’m in love with a fantasy. You feel so unknowable sometimes. And then I realize that you’re so far ahead of me that it’s silly of me to even dream of existing in the same space as you.” Tears welled up in her eyes then, and she hated herself for losing control of her emotions, for showing him just how behind him she was. How was she supposed to change his mind this way? She had to be strong, had to show him she could help him shoulder his burdens, had to –

His eyes flashed, and he roughly cupped her chin. “Sakura,” he said raggedly. “Don’t ever say anything like that again. I wish you could read my mind; wish you could see just how much in awe of you I am. You have changed everything. If only you knew just how much I wish I could –”

He stopped, then, cutting himself off.

Sakura felt a smidgen of hope then. If Itachi, who was so controlled, could say more than he intended, maybe... Maybe showing him how lost she truly felt could actually work.

“How am I supposed to know what you wish if you won’t tell me, Itachi?” she asked sadly. “You won’t tell me *anything*. Everything I’ve learned, I’ve had to piece together myself. I don’t even know why you love me. I just have to trust that you really do, that I’m not just some, some distraction or some dalliance.”

She sat up then, not being able to bear to look at him anymore. She felt so vulnerable in that moment. She couldn’t even tell herself that the fact that he’d sacrificed himself to protect her was proof of his love for her. Not when he had a death wish, and his sacrifice could very well have been in pursuit of that. Her breaths came in shallow pants as she awaited his silent confirmation that her fears were truth.

And he finally spoke, and she felt an awful sense of relief.

“I wish I could marry you,” he whispered. “I see you wearing my necklace still, even though there’s no real reason for it anymore, and it brings me so much joy. I wish I could give you children, even though I do not have the right to even dream of such things after I slaughtered my own blood kin. I wish we could spend the rest of our lives together, and I wish I could wake up to see your face, your smile, every morning.”

Her heart pounded. It had worked? He was actually talking. She hoped dearly that he wasn’t just saying those things in the heat of the moment.

“What’s stopping you?” she demanded turning to face him, and winced at the sharpness of her tone. She softened it as she went on. “You could ask me to marry you right now. I would say yes. I’ve only known you for a while, but I already know that you’re the only one for me. You may think you don’t deserve children, but I definitely want them, and I don’t think you’d be so selfish that you’d deprive me of that. And if we’re married and having kids, I’d be really pissed off if you weren’t waking up next to me every morning.”

He hesitated, and she could see the indecision written clearly all over his face. She marvelled internally at just how open he was being, allowing his emotions to actually come to the surface instead of suppressing them as he usually did.

“Besides the obvious?” he finally answered. “Besides the fact that I know you long to return home, and that I cannot exactly walk in to Konoha?”

“You could,” she said, feeling her desperation surging up to the surface. “Itachi, please, if you’d only tell me what really happened, I could ask Shishou to re-open the investigation, verify your side of the story. Prove your innocence. It could be real. All your wishes could come true.”

He kissed her, and she could again feel his urgency, his desperation. As they broke apart, he continued to hold her face in his hands. “You’re wonderful, Sakura,” he breathed, pressing his forehead against hers. “So hopeful, so determined, even against impossible odds. So steadfast in your belief that I must have had a reason for everything. You make me believe that things truly could be different. I – I love you, your strength, your resilience, your heart, everything that is you.”

Even though he was speaking such wonderful words, Sakura felt her heart shattering into pieces. She’d failed. He’d dodged yet again. Everything he said was everything she’d ever dreamed of hearing from a lover, but coming from him, in this situation, all she heard was goodbye.

Itachi realized that he’d made a mistake – he’d been far too hasty in his planning. He’d figured that he would simply stay with Sakura in their current location and wait for Sasuke to find him. He’d been so caught up in the overwhelming emotion that had captured him when he’d realized his death was near that he’d neglected all thought of the logistics of how their final battle would actually take place.

While the outpost town they were situated in had a sparse enough population, he knew that his battle with Sasuke would necessarily be an explosive one, given the nature of their jutsu. They needed to hold the battle somewhere where there was no risk of civilians being caught in the crossfire – Itachi was not willing to endanger innocents.

And he also needed to figure out a way to immobilize Sakura so she would not interfere in the battle, as she was sure to. Warmth suffused his chest as he thought of her declaration that they could build a life together, that she would marry him, bear his children. He loved her so much for it, but it created an obstacle he would need to overcome.

In any case, he would need to travel to a location that was suitably

deserted for his confrontation with Sasuke. He'd always planned on using one of the old Uchiha bases, built before Konoha's founding, but it was located in the Land of Fire.

Given that the Akatsuki rings allowed the wearer's location to be tracked, it meant he would have to deal with them as well. He looked down at his ring again, and wished not for the first time that it could simply be removed. But there was no use dwelling on such things. Not when they couldn't be changed.

He hated the need to think of such things when he'd just wanted to enjoy the afternoon out with Sakura. And yet, perhaps it was inevitable, he mused, stroking her arm. All the things that had attracted him to her – her intelligence, her tenacity – were precisely what were driving her to dig deeper into his motivations and his intentions.

She looked up at him, head moving back from where it had been buried in his chest. He felt a flash of guilt at seeing the reddish tinge to her eyes. He'd truly hurt her with his refusal to give her real answers. But how could he? She would surely try to stop him, and as much as he wished she *could*, he owed it to Sasuke to finish playing this drama out. She was already suspicious, if all the false smiles she'd given him that afternoon were any indication.

She didn't ask him what he was thinking of, but the look in her eyes was enough for him to hear the question.

"I will need to report in to Akatsuki," he said reluctantly, feeling a sense of dread just thinking of it. Who knew what had transpired when he'd been unconscious? He knew Konan was dead, yes, but what about Kisame?

She nodded in understanding. "Do you... want me to leave while you do it?" she asked, and he hated the trepidation in her tone. He'd put it there by consistently shutting her out.

"No," he said immediately, and watched with relief as she relaxed in his arms. "I want you there. It will help to have you watch Pain, and notice any cues that I may miss."

She smiled wryly. "I guess it's time for Brainwashed Sakura's grand reappearance then?" she teased. He felt thankful that her mirth actually appeared to be genuine this time, and he wanted to make sure she continued to feel that way.

He widened his eyes in mock surprise. "You mean you have not been Brainwashed Sakura all this time?"

She let out a squeal of outrage and immediately rolled herself on top of him, lightly pummeling his chest.

"You take that back right now!" she laughed, and he found himself wishing again that this could be his forever. This lightness in his heart that came from hearing her laugh, teasing her, provoking her and watching her spit fire in a way that only made her all the more attractive to him.

It suddenly occurred to him, then. What lies he would need to spin in order to achieve all his aims. He could throw her off the scent, manufacture a reasonable explanation for Akatsuki as to why he needed to cross through the Land of Fire, and bring Sakura closer to home before he had to leave her.

And it also had the added benefit of stretching his time out with Sakura a little longer.

"In any case," he said, catching her fists in his hands, "I do not think there will be much of a need for Brainwashed Sakura any longer."

"Really?"

"Yes. Especially if I manage to convince Pain of the need for us to take a different route from here on out. One that will take us through the Land of Fire."

Her eyebrows furrowed then, and a glare crossed her face. "You promised you wouldn't leave me," she said, a dangerous tone entering her voice. "This better not be some trick to drop me off in Konoha while you go off on some self-sacrificing jaunt."

He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. She knew him so well after such a short time together. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"No trick," he assured her. "In any case, I doubt I would be welcome in Akatsuki after letting such a valuable hostage escape."

Her eyes widened. "Wait, you're telling me that you're actually planning to come back with me? To Konoha?"

He nodded slowly. He needed to sell the ruse, and the words he spoke

next would be pivotal. "I cannot return to the Akatsuki without you. I am on treacherous footing as it is. And I find myself unwilling to put you in that sort of danger again." He swallowed, and allowed some of his worry to show on his face. "The only way to keep you safe is for you to go back home. And if the price for that safety is for me to return and face the consequences of my actions, it is a price I am willing to pay."

Sakura did her best not to let her suspicion show. It was... The things he was saying. They were what she wanted so badly to hear. It would mean the tentative hopes she'd been nursing could actually come true.

Yet again, the sense that this was *too easy* flitted through her mind.

It was so unlike Itachi to just... give in. She thought back to some of their earlier arguments when they'd been planning on how to present her to Akatsuki. He'd been so unwilling to budge on even the smallest of things. There was *no way* he would just agree to return. No way that he'd have changed his mind just like that.

And she could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, as the anger at being lied to and deceived began to overtake her. She couldn't let him see, couldn't let him know she was on to him. He would come up with something even more elaborate that she'd never be able to outwit. If there was one thing all reports on Uchiha Itachi agreed on, it was that his genius was unparalleled.

And so, she simply threw her arms around him, and buried her face in his chest. She breathed in his comforting scent, savoured his warmth, and listened to his heart, and wished she could spend the rest of her life this way.

Itachi stroked her back. He hated the need to deceive her this way, and not for the first time, he resented the circumstances in his life that had brought him to this point. *It is what it is*, he reminded himself. From the moment he'd surrendered to their love the previous night, he'd known that their time was limited.

He tried to tell himself he was fortunate. The time that all people had was limited, after all. He was simply cognizant of the fact, and knowing exactly how long he had left with her meant he would cherish those few moments all the more.

It didn't work. The greed he'd thought he'd successfully locked away

clawed at him from the inside, demanding *more, more, more*. Especially now that he'd made the mistake of speaking his most forbidden desires to her, and she'd accepted them.

With the discipline he'd cultivated since birth, he slowly gathered up all the threads of *want* burning within him, and pushed them aside. Denying himself was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

There was no more use in putting things off. He had to begin preparing. The sooner he reported in to Akatsuki, the better. He sat up, gently lifting her up with him.

"Come," he said quietly. "It is time we returned. I must report in to Akatsuki, and you will need to make contact with Hokage-sama to prepare her for our arrival." He'd always planned on leaking intel to Konoha so that they would retrieve Sasuke after their battle ended, and he'd realized early on that allowing Sakura to openly communicate with the Hokage would assist in that end.

Ensuring that there was no outside interference would be more complicated now that he could not count on Kisame to keep anyone else out for the duration of the battle, but he would find a way. He always did.

Chapter End Notes

Itachi and Sakura admitting their feelings for each other was just the first step! Now they have to actually build a relationship, and learn to communicate with each other. It was so fun to write this chapter - letting them actually banter, and have those fluffy moments was great!

Traitor

Chapter Notes

I was listening to 'My Love' by Sia while writing the ItaSaku moment about halfway through this chapter, and I feel like having it play really added to the atmosphere of the entire scene!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Itachi watched with regret as Sakura got dressed in one of the yukatas she'd worn as part of her act as Brainwashed Sakura. He much preferred seeing her in her usual ninja attire, when she stood beside him as his equal.

It made him recall one of his less charitable moments, when he'd felt almost a sneaking sense of relief at the thought of the Uchiha clan ceasing to exist. When he'd realized it meant he would never need to live up to the expectations of a clan heir, never need to marry a bride chosen for him who would be meek and submissive.

It had sickened him that he could be so selfish, that he could view the death of his family and becoming a missing-nin as almost a sort of freedom.

And that was how he knew that he needed to die. Sakura thought of him as a good man in spite of everything he'd done, and he knew she was wrong. Someone who was truly good would never see the deaths of everyone they held near as holding any sort of advantage for them whatsoever.

He watched as she fussed over her appearance, straightening her yukata and checking and re-checking her hair. He smiled, remembering how she'd done the exact same thing before the first time he'd brought her down to meet the Akatsuki. How things had changed since then, he reflected. He'd been so paranoid then about showing her any kind of support, anxious that she'd see right through the façade of a disinterested psychopath that he tried to project.

And now, he was free to do as he wished. It was part of why he felt so light around her, he realized. She'd figured out so much about him that there really wasn't a point to maintaining the pretence anymore. He was free to be who he truly was when they were together, and not needing to worry about how she perceived him was a burden off his

shoulders. The very idea felt revolutionary to him, given how he'd always carried layers upon layers of secrets since he'd entered ANBU.

Again, the thought crossed his mind that he could just tell her everything. Not his plans for his imminent death of course, but to confess the full truth of the massacre. To bare his soul to her. She'd already begun to see the truth anyway –

He stopped that train of thought. It was a pointless endeavour. To tell her would be to increase the risk of Sasuke discovering the truth.

Shaking his head, he walked over to where she stood in front of the mirror, and wrapped his arms around her.

“You’re perfect as you are,” he assured her, resting his chin on her shoulder. “And in any case, only your silhouette would be visible. You do not need to worry about little details of your appearance.”

She sighed. “I know, you’ve told me before. But it’s just... This is huge, you know? If we make one mistake, we’ll have Akatsuki at our footsteps. And I know that I’m the weak link here. You’ve been successfully fooling them for years. And I can’t even tell a lie to save my life.”

He allowed his love for and confidence in her to show on his face. “And you were clever enough to come up with a way to circumvent that. If you are truly worried though, perhaps you can resume the mantle of Brainwashed Sakura for this final time. If you have not already dismissed her, that is.”

“That would probably be for the best,” she agreed, and then met his eyes in the mirror. “But you don’t mind? I mean... it’s been a while since you last saw her, and a lot has changed since then...”

“She is part of you, and so is also important to me. And I would not mind the opportunity to properly say goodbye,” he assured her. “Besides, her mentality would actually make her perfect for this occasion. Her sensitivity to the opinion of others would make her it easier for her to observe even minute shifts in Pain’s body language.”

“And you think I’m not observant enough?” Sakura grumbled, but there was no bite behind it.

He realized that she was arguing for the sake of being argumentative, and chuckled. He couldn’t help it – there was just something so entertaining about her indignation, and the way in which she tried to

win every single argument. It made provoking her enjoyable in a way that he hadn't experienced in years.

"In this respect? Not as much as she is," he replied. "You have gained a certain confidence in your abilities and your place in the world that makes it easier for you to ignore certain cues."

"Only you could insult and compliment a woman at the same time," she muttered.

He wondered vaguely at her mood, and quickly reassessed his earlier perception of her state of mind. She appeared to be pricklier than usual, and wondered if it was the stress of his upcoming report to Pain that was making her so agitated. It made sense, he supposed. The last time they'd reported, she'd ended up stabbed. And that had been when Itachi had been in slightly better standing with the Akatsuki.

"Sakura. It's going to be alright," he said quietly, imbuing his words with a confidence he did not truly feel. It would not be the first lie he'd told her, after all.

"Itachi. Your report is long overdue," Pain said in icy tones.

"I apologize, Leader-sama. We were ambushed by a squadron of Kumo nin on our way out of Kasaki. I was heavily injured, and would have lost my life were it not for Sakura's healing abilities."

Pain said nothing. Sakura might have been worried, but she knew Itachi-sama could handle it. He was wonderful at everything he did.

Sure enough, the silence might have broken a lesser man – it almost broke her with how uncomfortable and tense it was – but Itachi-sama held firm, and it was Pain who finally gave in.

"Report," he said.

"We split into two teams when leaving Kasaki in order to increase the chances of being able to aid one another in the event of an ambush. The strategy turned out to be... ill-advised. The squadron from Kumo was prepared to face two separate teams, and waylaid us on our exact route. I faced a team of four. All were ANBU-level ninja. They attempted to grab Sakura, and I disabled them, though I collapsed in the process. Sakura managed to retreat with me. I am uncertain of the outcome of Konan-san's and Kisame's battle. I sensed two distinct signatures of rather massive amounts of chakra being wielded. I

suspect that a jinchuriki may have been sent to face off against Kisame, given the quantity of chakra involved. I only regained consciousness yesterday, and only managed to regain enough strength to report in today. I would have expected Konan-san at least to have contacted me by now. The fact that she has not is... worrying. And given that she did not have access to medical care as I did, I can only fear the worst.”

Silence again reigned, and it took all of Sakura’s willpower to keep her nerves from showing. She was again thankful that Itachi-sama had asked her to sit seiza at his feet, where she would not have to make eye contact with Pain.

“I find it difficult to believe that the three of you would have had such trouble with these shinobi,” Pain said, his toneless voice not giving away any of his thoughts or emotions. “Konan assessed that they were not a threat.”

“The ones Konan sensed were probably not,” Itachi-sama acknowledged. Sakura again marvelled at how he managed to retain his calm composure even under such pressure.

“I believe those were sentries. The ones that ambushed us popped in, using some variant of the summoning technique based on the way in which they appeared.” A pause, then he went on. “They appeared to be rather... well-informed of our movements. In a manner that would suggest an information leak of some sort. It is worrying, especially given that none of our members have any ties to Kumo.”

“Indeed,” Pain mused. “This bears further thought.”

Itachi-sama nodded. “Leader-sama, given the multiple ways in which this hostage plan has been compromised thus far, I believe it may be prudent for me to take a different route to return to headquarters. We can then regroup.” He paused. “Leader-sama, is there any news on Konan-san and Kisame? Even with them possibly having faced off against a jinchuriki, it is troubling that they both may have been disabled.”

“And what route is that?” Pain demanded.

While Itachi-sama had paused while speaking multiple times over the course of the conversation, those had seemed deliberate, a way of adding weight to his words. This, though, was the first time Sakura noticed him actually hesitate.

“Surely, you do not think *I* would be the one leaking information, Itachi,” Pain snapped, finally displaying some form of feeling.

“No, Leader-sama,” Itachi-sama responded, regaining his self-possession so quickly and easily that Sakura had to almost wonder if his hesitation had been done purposefully as well. She felt warmth pooling in her belly at the thought of just how skilled he was at navigating these dangerous currents, and had to stop herself from audibly expressing her appreciation for him.

“I do not mean to question your judgement, Leader-sama,” he went on humbly, although he was doing exactly just that. “However, while it would be nonsense for you to conspire against your own organization, it may not be the case for those you trust.”

“You dare accuse Konan?” Pain growled.

“Not Konan-san, Leader-sama,” Itachi-sama replied smoothly. “While I may have disagreed with her assessment of various strategies, I believe she only has the best interest of the organization at heart. But it does not mean others would be equally pure of motive.”

Pain nodded stiffly. “You were told from the beginning that you were being given a great deal of leeway. Still, you continue to take it for granted and abuse the privilege. This is the last time I will accept anything less than complete compliance with the instructions you are given, Itachi.” And so saying, he terminated the connection.

Sakura sagged wordlessly against Itachi’s leg, relieved it was over. She looked up into her beloved’s face, and he looked so unbelievably *tired* at that moment. Even more so than usual. This was no time for her to fall apart. He needed her, needed her support.

She rose and drew him over to the bed. “Anata, you did so well,” she said, kneeling behind him and rubbing his shoulders. She recalled that he’d once done something similar for her, although that had been when *that harlot* – her lip curled – had been the one in control.

“Did I?” he asked wearily. “It seems all I achieved was to provoke further suspicion.”

Sakura shook her head vehemently. “He was already suspicious to begin with. You’re amazing, but even you cannot change how somebody else thinks. At this point, the best thing you *can* do would be to deflect suspicion, which is exactly what you did. He will need to spend at least some time considering the alternative you presented,

that there is a mole that you need to address. You did that well enough that he stopped pressing you for detail at the end.”

He hummed, a clear indication to Sakura that he wanted her to go on. She shivered. Itachi-sama was always attentive to her words, but this situation, with him needing *her* perspective, was a heady feeling indeed.

“His last words were more of a power trip than anything else. He couldn’t let you get away with questioning him and showing him less than complete obedience. But the concerns you raised were quite valid ones too, and he couldn’t dismiss it outright. So, he shifted his focus to reprimanding you for your attitude instead. You did well, anata.” And with that assertion, she leaned forward and placed her hands on his chest, capturing him in a gentle embrace.

He placed his hands atop hers, and she felt him relax. She smiled in triumph. She’d done it. She’d comforted him, as a good lover should.

They remained in that position for a few minutes before he turned to face her, and pulled her down so that they were both lying down. “Anata!” she squealed.

He cupped her face in his hands, looking at her with an expression so tender, she thought she was going to explode.

“I love you,” he breathed. “My time with you is running out, and I know you will need to depart soon. But you’ve cared for me in a way that I do not feel I deserve, and I... I do not know how I will ever thank you for it.”

She’d been wrong. *This* was it, was the thing that set off fireworks everywhere within her. He said he loved *her*, not that other woman who also lived in her head.

She smiled, hoping all her thoughts came through, hoping he could see how much this meant to her. He was right, she thought sadly, that this was where their time would end. That other Sakura had warned her as they’d switched places, and she’d resented it at first, wondering why it had to be her that was leaving. But now, looking into her beloved’s eyes, she couldn’t bring herself to summon up any bitterness.

“Anata... This may be forward of me. But before I have to leave you, please. Just love me.”

He made no answer, but simply drew her closer, and brushed his lips against hers. At the same time, his hands stroked down the length of her body in ghostly touches that barely made contact, yet set every single nerve ending on fire.

She marvelled again at her fortune in having a lover like him, and how he could turn her brains to mush with just a single touch. She let out a helpless whine, and met his gaze, shivering at the heat within his onyx eyes.

It was everything Sakura could have ever wanted, everything she'd ever dreamed of. The tenderness of his caresses, the symphony created by their mingled moans, and how he never once looked away from her eyes. When he entered her, she felt as if her soul was finally complete, and when he spilled himself inside her with a whisper of her name, she felt as if she'd ascended to a different plane.

And so, with her dreams fulfilled, loved by the only man she'd ever wanted, she closed her eyes and let go. As she dissipated back into the whole she had been formed from, she heard him murmur his love for her, and surrendered her entire self with a smile on her face.

Itachi looked at Sakura, asleep in his arms. He regretted that it had taken him so long to understand the nature of her personas. They weren't really different people, as he'd assumed at one point. Brainwashed Sakura was just Sakura's softer and more sensitive side. She was used to seeing the personas as different people, but he guessed that it was just her way of compartmentalizing truths and memories she had trouble dealing with.

Even calling her by that name was to do her a disservice, he reflected.

People weren't simply one-dimensional collections of traits, after all. It would make things so much simpler if they were – it would be easier to judge right from wrong, discriminate friend from foe. Everyone had the capacity to be kind, cruel, selfish, generous. It was something he'd learned during his time in the Akatsuki, as he'd been forced to come to grips with the fact that his fellow Akatsuki were *people*, with hopes and dreams, and precious people of their own.

It was foolishness, really. That he could regret betraying a terrorist organization, when he'd committed far greater betrayals of his own flesh and blood. And yet, he'd been with them for ten years – almost as long as he'd spent with his clan. Was it truly any wonder that he'd come to find a certain comfort in the familiar routines and

mannerisms?

Konan had been a thorn in his side since he'd taken Sakura under his protection. Still, he regretted her death, and he worried for Kisame as well, even though he very well knew that if ordered to, Kisame would have killed him without blinking.

He sighed. What good was it to think of such things at this juncture? He and Sakura would take around four days to travel to the Uchiha hideout in the Land of Fire. And after that, it was simply a matter of waiting for Sasuke to find him.

Trying to divert his attention to more pleasant things, he performed the diagnostic technique Sakura had taught him back at Akatsuki headquarters. He smiled at the simple pleasure of interpreting all the things he sensed with his chakra – she was perfectly healthy. Her stress hormone levels were rather elevated, but that was to be expected, given the circumstances.

He wondered, not for the first time, about the trajectory his life might have taken had he been taught to heal instead of kill. What a life it would have been, he reflected, to not have to see the faces of everyone he'd ever killed flash through his mind every night.

And yet, it was as he'd once told Sakura. Even though he'd meant the words to encourage her, they applied to him as well. Every step, every choice had led him to this point in his life. He might have lived a life free of the guilt that came with having blood on his hands, but in that situation, he surely would have been powerless to put a stop to the massacre.

Somehow, knowing his death was near made it easier to accept this perspective. To stop with the self-recriminations. What was done was done, and every step he'd made had led him to Sakura.

And knowing that was enough.

The man who called himself Pain watched as his subordinates filed out of the room where he'd given them their orders.

Today, they were going to hunt a traitor.

Oh, he was well aware of Itachi's conflicted loyalties – Madara had warned him before Itachi had set out on this mission, and Konan herself had been deeply suspicious of Itachi's true motives. Pain had

been the trusting fool who had asserted that Itachi had served the organization well for ten years, and had no reason to suddenly turn on them, when nothing had changed.

And because he'd been short-sighted, too proud to listen to the warnings of those who knew better than him, the only precious person he had left in the world was dead.

And Itachi had the absolute nerve to lie to him, and to feign *concern* for the woman he'd probably murdered in cold blood. Pain would have laughed if he had found such a gesture necessary. The rings could track the wearer's location up until the wearer died. Most importantly, after the wearer's death, the wearer's final location would remain recorded until the ring was bonded to a different wearer. It was a technique Pain had been rather pleased with when he'd created it. Although the original intention had been to facilitate communication by connecting the rings with headquarters, the ability to track the wearer was a useful side effect indeed.

Pain had sent Zetsu to scope out Konan's last recorded location, and he'd found traces of Konan's, Itachi's, and Haruno Sakura's chakra there. There was no other trace.

The evidence spoke for itself. Itachi had set up the ambush, and probably deliberately caused himself injury in order to add credence to his tale. Pain had wanted to give him a final chance to give any reasonable explanation – after all, it was entirely possible that Haruno Sakura had somehow managed to break free of his genjutsu, take them by surprise and escape after incapacitating them.

But based on the lies Itachi had spoken, it was obvious that Itachi himself had orchestrated Konan's death. And for that, he would pay.

Pain only regretted that he could not go himself to track down the traitor. Madara had seemed remarkably blasé about Itachi's defection, stating that he'd fulfilled his purpose and that he had plans in place to recapture Sakura. For him to personally leave after that would be to invite Madara's suspicions about Pain's own reduced motivation to carry out the Tsuki no Me plan. He had no doubt that once Madara discovered the truth, Pain would find his eyes extracted and himself dead.

He had no real complaints against that fate, but he would see Itachi dead first.

And so, to throw off suspicion, he was sending the two remaining

combat teams. Sasori and Deidara had previously been successful in capturing Haruno Sakura, and he was confident they could handle her again. The Zombie Combo, meanwhile, would be in charge of capturing Itachi. He was a highly talented shinobi, to be sure, but even his prodigious abilities had limits. He would certainly have trouble against those two, given that they were functionally immortal.

Wait for me, Yahiko, Konan. I will deal with this scum, and then I will join you.

Chapter End Notes

Itachi took advantage of saying goodbye to Brainwashed Sakura to say his goodbyes to our Sakura as well :)

Nope I definitely wasn't crying or anything while I was writing Brainwashed Sakura dissolving. Why would you even say that, baka!

Stay With Me

Chapter Notes

HOLY SHIT GUYS. This story's made it to 100k words? I'm so shook - I thought I'd hit 80k words max, and here we are, still going strong. I *think* we're at about the 70-75% mark, but I'm honestly not sure. I was previously trying to keep to a structure with separate acts, but then I realized I forgot to factor in a wholeass plot thread in my planning, so. I'm just really hoping I manage to keep things coherent at this point HAHA.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Kakashi skulked outside the Hokage's office. He knew he needed Naruto for the mission to retrieve Sakura. Tsunade had briefed him on her suspicion that Sakura had fallen for Uchiha Itachi, and that she might be reluctant to return to the village. That meant pulling out the big guns.

Naruto wouldn't let her leave just like that. Not after he'd failed to persuade Sasuke to return to the village all those years ago.

But bringing the number one knuckle-headed hyperactive ninja on such a delicate mission came with its own set of risks. Namely, that he would deviate from the plan and do his own thing. Given that they were effectively going against orders to even undertake this mission in the first place, let alone the fact that he intended to bring Konoha's jinchuuriki, discretion would be a priority indeed.

Killer B's involvement in the previous confrontation had already created a headache for Tsunade-sama, who had needed to deal with an irate Raikage. If the council discovered that she'd not only disobeyed orders to send out a team, and that she'd also risked Naruto falling into Akatsuki's hands... well.

He needed to be sure that Naruto would obey his orders. He did not want to be Hokage anytime soon.

And so, when he sensed the door opening and Naruto heading out after making his routine report to the Hokage, he made himself visible, attention seemingly consumed by Icha Icha as usual.

"Kakashi-sensei!"

Hook, line, and sinker.

“Yes, Naruto?” he asked, not bothering to lift his eyes from the book. He knew Naruto would be leaping about trying to catch his attention.

“Baa-chan said you’re leading *that* mission. I’m coming with you, believe it!”

He idly turned a page, projecting a serene veneer. “No, you’re not. You’re heading back to Mount Myōboku and you’re staying put.”

“Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto pleaded. He actually had the sense to lower his voice. Maybe the boy really had matured. In any case, Kakashi had already put up a general genjutsu to make sure that this conversation remained private. “It’s Sakura-chan we’re talking about! I have to be there.”

“You don’t. I already have a team that will work well for this mission.”

“You need me, believe it. I’ve figured out the Hiraishin! I can get us back to Konoha quickly in case of an emergency.”

Kakashi finally put his book away and looked at Naruto with a stern expression. He folded his arms. He needed Naruto to understand the seriousness of what he was about to say.

“That may be true. But as it stands, at this moment, you’re a liability.”

Naruto’s expression darkened. “A liability?” he asked quietly. “Not when it comes to my precious people. I would do *anything* to make sure Sakura-chan gets back safe, believe it. Can you say the same about the rest of your team?”

“I can say that they’ll follow my orders without question. And that’s more important to me on such a delicate mission. I’ve personally dealt with Uchiha Itachi before, and I know what he’s capable of.”

Naruto’s eyes blazed, and Kakashi realized that he could not feel any traces of the Kyuubi’s chakra at all, as he’d been able to in Naruto’s younger years.

He truly has matured, Kakashi marvelled. For him to have such control spoke well of both his emotional development and his ability to work with the Kyuubi.

“I’ve met him before too, Kakashi-sensei. I saw what he did to Sasuke. And he’s had Sakura-chan with him for *ages*. I need to be there. If following your orders is what it takes for you to let me join the mission, I will, believe it!”

Kakashi nodded. This was what he’d wanted to hear.

“Disguise yourself and meet at the gate in one hour.”

Sakura screamed.

Itachi found himself immediately out of bed in a battle-ready position, indifferent to his nudity. If his lover was in danger, he could not care about anything except defending her.

After a few seconds of looking about wildly and desperately reaching out with his chakra to sense enemies, he straightened out of the crouch he’d dropped into and looked back towards Sakura. She was seated upright, knuckles white and clenching the blanket. Her eyes were widened in stark terror. Itachi immediately went to her side, pulling her into his arms and stroking her hair.

“It’s okay. I’m here, I’m here,” he murmured, remembering how she’d soothed him with those very words all those days ago, after her genjutsu which had forced him to relive the massacre.

Eventually, her body relaxed from its stiff posture, and she crumpled against him, sobbing into his chest. He felt so utterly helpless in that moment, wishing he knew what had brought this on, wishing he knew how to take her pain away.

He forced himself to stay composed for her sake, even as the panic grew within him. Between the two of them, it had always been Sakura who had been strong, while he was the one who had constantly buckled under the weight of emotion. Now that their roles were reversed, he didn’t know what to do. He wanted to try asking her what was wrong, but what if she didn’t want to talk about it? He knew he’d never wanted to speak about his own nightmares.

Thankfully, the decision was taken from him as she began to speak. “It was awful,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I don’t understand. We’re out of headquarters, Konan’s dead, and we’re going back to Konoha, so why...”

He hummed in a way that he hoped was encouraging, and continued

stroking her hair. As the silence stretched, he realized that she probably expected a response from him.

“The mind often takes a while to process events,” he offered. “It may be that you are only now coming to terms with the experiences you’ve had over the past weeks.” He winced internally at how awkward he sounded. She’d wanted comfort, and he’d instead chosen to take her words literally and give her an explanation.

He counted himself fortunate that she nodded, and looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. It appeared that the tears were no longer flowing, at least. Perhaps he had done something right.

“I thought I’d dealt with it,” she laughed shakily. “Stupid of me to assume, I guess.”

This, at least, he knew how to respond to. “You’re not. I wish you would not say such things about yourself.” He hesitated, wondering if he should ask, before he decided he had nothing to lose. She could always say no if she was not comfortable, although the idea that she might refuse to speak made him feel rather unpleasant.

“Do you wish to speak about it?”

She sighed. “It was that day I met the rest of Akatsuki. And... when Konan ordered you to stab me, and I *knew* I could heal myself. I desperately wanted to, but I couldn’t. Not until I had permission.”

He sucked in a breath. Yes, that would be a traumatic memory alright. “Do you need me to leave?” he asked, dreading her answer. “After all, I am the one who wielded the knife that day.”

She shook her head, and Itachi couldn’t deny the relief that coursed through him at her certainty. “No. It’s a bit difficult to explain. You remember how I told you before, that you seemed like two people to me?” He nodded, and she went on. “It was kind of like that for this dream. The Itachi who stabbed me was just so cold and empty. He’s a completely different person from you.” A wry smile crossed her face. “I don’t think that Itachi would have even tried to comfort me.”

He nodded slowly. It made sense, he supposed. Given how she was used to seeing the world through fractured personas, it wouldn’t require too large a leap for her to also view others through the same lens – as multiple sets of consciousness sharing the same body.

The dread returned, and intensified. She saw him as two people. He’d

thought it was only a figure of speech before, but now, he knew she truly perceived him that way. At least it explained how she was able to say with confidence that he was a good man. She just hadn't reconciled that the 'Two Itachis' she mentioned were one and the same. One was a role he played, yes, but it was a role he'd played for over ten years. How long did one need to live a lie before the lie became truth?

Heavy thought, that. And not worth pursuing at this moment. After all, it was not like it mattered – even with their plans to travel to Konoha giving him a slight extension on life, he'd be dead within two weeks. Perhaps if he forced Sakura to accept that he *was* the cold-hearted murderer, it might help her to accept his death? It was worth considering. But not at that moment. At that moment, she needed the comfort of knowing she was safe.

An idea came to him, then, as he recalled how his mother had been aghast that he'd been brought to the battlefield at the tender age of four, and that he'd made his first kill. She'd refused to allow him to sleep alone for weeks, and she'd sung him to sleep every single night. She'd watched him carefully, and woken him up every single time she realized he was having a nightmare. She'd comfort him and sang again to send him back to sleep. With time, just the memory of her voice singing those words became one that allowed him to fully relax.

"Beloved, don't you weep, beloved, dry your eyes, rest your head close to my heart..." he began, doing his best not to feel self-conscious. Sakura's eyes widened with delight, but she thankfully didn't comment. She simply closed her eyes and burrowed her head against his chest. He continued singing softly until he heard her breath deepen.

He maintained vigilance for the rest of the night, refusing to allow himself to sink into a deeper slumber. Finally, there was something he could do for her. His own rest would come once he was dead.

They were almost to the Land of Fire, and Sakura felt a sense of dread coiling in her belly. She could feel Itachi slipping away from her with every step they took. He was becoming quieter and more detached. Oh, he was still affectionate to her, to be sure. She'd continued to be plagued by nightmares each night, and he'd patiently stroked and soothed her and sung her to sleep each night.

She almost smiled wistfully at the thought of how safe she'd felt,

surrounded by his warmth, his rich baritone lulling her into what promised to be a peaceful slumber, even though it never ended that way. And he'd been so patient with her throughout too, even as his tear troughs deepened and told the story of how he was sacrificing his own rest for her sake.

She sighed. She wanted so badly to show him that she was capable of supporting him in his battle against his own demons. And instead, she found herself crumbling under the weight of the horrors she faced, pitiful though they were in comparison to what he'd surely been through.

As each day passed, his gazes grew more distant, and his kisses more desperate. She found herself losing hope. She'd gotten in touch with shishou, and she'd been assured that Kakashi-sensei was on his way with a team to meet them. But she held no illusions that they'd be able to subdue a determined Itachi. They'd probably have the opposite effect – reassured of her safety, she just knew he would bid her farewell and head off to seek his own death, regardless of the promise he'd made.

And despite her resolve, she hadn't been able to come up with any solution that would keep Itachi alive and with her. She'd tried drawing him in to speak about their future, but he'd dodged and deflected those topics just as he did anything related to the massacre.

She'd contemplated more nuclear options, of course. Knocking him out when he was asleep and forcibly dragging him back. Threatening to commit suicide. And yet, she just couldn't do it. Her own words came back to her, over and over – you just didn't give ultimatums to people you cared about. And even if she brought him back by force, what then? She couldn't force him to *stay*. She'd learned that lesson the hard way with Sasuke. And even if his love for her survived any instance of emotional blackmail, he'd eventually grow to resent her, and possibly resent Konoha as well. She knew it.

And so, Sakura decided on the only tactic she could really use. Sincerity. Honestly telling and showing him how much she loved him, again and again, and hoping that somehow, her love would be enough for him, where it hadn't been for anyone else.

She did not hold much hope of that happening.

It was thus with a heavy heart that she agreed when Itachi told her they were stopping for a break. Each time they stopped, she wondered

if this was it – if this was the moment he'd apologize, break his promise, and leave her as so many had left her.

It was what she expected when he pulled her close to him, wrapped his arms around her, and nuzzled into her hair.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and she felt the foreboding creep even further up her spine.

"For what?" she asked, knowing, and dreading, the answer.

"I haven't been very good at comforting you," he continued in that same quiet voice, much to Sakura's surprise. It was with a great deal of self-control that she managed to keep herself from jerking in his arms. This... wasn't what she'd expected. Not by a long shot.

"What brought this on?" she asked.

He sighed. "You've been unhappy, even though you try to hide it. I know that I am not very comfortable with emotion – not as much as you are. Every time I see your pain, I desperately want to take it away. But I, I –"

He paused then, and swallowed. His arms tightened around her, and she almost thought she could feel him trembling. It was as if he was clutching at her as his sole connection to safer shores. So softly she could barely hear him, his voice shaking, he finally completed his thought. "I do not know how."

Sakura again felt a rush of warmth for this loving, patient, *humble* man. What had she done to deserve someone like him? She turned in his arms, and stroked his face, as she loved doing. It was that gentle frisson that she felt, the way his eyes fluttered at the pleasure of it, the way his lips seemed to part in surprise that someone could touch him so tenderly.

"Oh, Itachi," she sighed. "You already do more than enough."

"Your standards are far too low."

She laughed. "Or yours are too high," she teased, tiptoeing so she could press a kiss to his lips. "I don't expect you to be perfect. And I don't want you to take my pain away in any case. It tells me that I'm a survivor, you know?"

She hadn't consciously thought of it that way, but as the words

flowed, they somehow seemed *right*. She had survived being in Akatsuki headquarters. Much of it was due to Itachi, true, but she'd still made it out. A smile broke across her face as she thought of it.

"I survived," she repeated, gazing up at the man she loved. "And that's because of you. Why would I be mad at you over something so ridiculous when you've done so much for me? When you've never even once complained about caring for me, *being* there for me?"

Stupid, stubborn, man that he was, he still looked unconvinced. "I should be able to do more," he said.

At that moment, Sakura had a flash of understanding at just how much Itachi carried on his shoulders. She recalled how he'd apologized when *her* personas had thrown themselves at him in his mindscape. How he'd constantly put himself in harm's way to protect her. How he'd taken her supposed suicide attempts so personally.

He truly believed himself responsible for everything that happened to those he cared for, if not everyone around him. Her heart clenched at the thought of just how lonely, and how weary, he must be. For the first time, she found herself understanding his desire to die.

That didn't mean she was going to just let him go, though.

"What would you do, Itachi? Would you cast a genjutsu on me to make me believe I was happy? Or would you erase every difficult memory I've ever had? You *can't*. And even if you could, it wouldn't be right. What you've been doing – staying with me, loving me, respecting me, that's all I need. All anyone needs, really." She hoped desperately that he'd take the hint she'd given. That he'd realize that what she wanted, more than anything, was more time with him.

To be enough for him to decide to stay.

"I just want you to stay with me," she repeated. "I don't think you really understand, Itachi. Nobody's ever accepted me and respected me the way you do." Unbidden, images came to her mind. Weak little Sakura, always left behind, always needing to be coddled. "But you... even when you want to protect me, you don't underestimate me. Even now, even though I wake you up every night with my crying, you don't think any less of me."

"Why would I? You would make a formidable opponent. We all bear wounds. Yours are just fresher than mine. That doesn't make you any less strong."

He sounded so matter-of-fact about it, as if it should be something that was readily obvious, and she loved him all the more for it.

“Not to you, maybe,” she said softly. “That’s one of the things I love about you. The way you see me as a kunoichi first and a woman second. And every time you tell me and show me just how much faith you have in my abilities, it becomes easier for me to believe that I’m strong enough to overcome anything. That’s why I’m saying that all I really need is for you to stay.”

He looked as if he wanted to say something further, when the colour drained from his face. She felt his chakra flare, and she turned to see a familiar white clay bird hovering nearby.

“Deidara,” she whispered.

“Not just him,” Itachi said, his voice hoarse. “Kakuzu, Hidan, and Sasori too.”

Their eyes met, and Sakura saw his uncompromising determination in the set of his jaw and in his steely gaze. His mind was made up, and whatever she said, she would not be able to deter him from the course he’d chosen.

“Sakura. Run.”

“How could you even suggest – I won’t – “ she began, outraged.

He shook his head. “This is beyond just a normal Akatsuki mission. Four of them at once – Pain must have figured out where my loyalties lie. They must mean to re-capture you, and disable me. Perhaps even eliminate me. But if you’re nearby, I won’t be able to bring myself to use my most lethal tactics. Not when it would put you at risk. We don’t have long before they catch up with us – only another three to four minutes. You need to run as far as you can.”

“Do you plan to take all four of them on by yourself?” she demanded. Itachi was considered almost godlike in his abilities by Konoha nin, but they were *Akatsuki*. She had personally experienced how it was to battle Deidara and Sasori. This was far riskier than his taking on the ninja from Kumo, and she’d be *damned* if she left him to face danger by himself again.

She almost breathed a sigh of relief when he shook his head. “I can’t,” he said soberly. “I’ll let Deidara and Hidan slip through. They’re likelier to be guided by their impulses, and to be rash. Your skillset

will allow you to capitalize on that. You'll need to lead them on a chase, get them riled up and irritated. And then, you must strike hard and fast. Make sure they cannot come back for a second hit."

She wanted desperately to believe his words. That even in spite of the way his eyes were creased in worry, that he trusted in her abilities to handle two Akatsuki at once. That he trusted in her to have his back, even after she'd failed him when they'd faced that squadron from Kumo.

Trust, she told herself. *You don't test the ones you love, and you don't give them ultimatums. You just trust them.* She knew that Itachi really did believe in her. She just had to believe in his words too.

"Got it," she said softly. She briskly rummaged through her pack, and pulled out some of the healing seals they'd prepared together back in Kasaki. She handed them to him. She didn't even want to think of him being hurt, but she had to face reality. She simply prayed that she would not return to find him on the verge of death again.

"Be safe," she said, turned her back to him, and began running as quickly as she could. She tried not to feel like a coward as she ran, praying that he truly meant it, that he wasn't just lying to her to get her out of the way.

That this wouldn't be the last time she ever saw him.

Chapter End Notes

I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm really not. I initially planned on ending the chapter at "Sakura. Run." but I decided to have a little pity on you guys. But not too much.

Divide and Conquer

Chapter Notes

I didn't think I'd be able to make this week's update, but I really wanted to get it out for you guys - especially considering the way the last chapter ended. Not going to lie, I struggled really hard with this chapter. Fight scenes are harddddddd.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Itachi watched Sakura run with a heavy heart. He'd once again failed to protect her. He should have destroyed the Akatsuki ring the instant he'd decided that he would not return. He should never have placed Sakura at risk, no matter how firmly he believed that he'd done enough to convince Pain that his loyalties lay with Akatsuki.

I love you, he thought, willing his words to reach her. *Keep yourself safe too.*

He knew she was capable of protecting herself. She'd defeated Deidara before, and she could do it again. She'd been canny enough to defeat Konan even while constrained by the need to conserve chakra. If she could stay clear of Hidan's scythe, she'd have no issue outwitting him.

He found himself thanking every deity he could think of that he'd already told Sakura everything he knew about every Akatsuki member's abilities, that he hadn't held back and put himself in a situation where he had to convey the information to her in the precious few minutes they had before the four closed in on them.

Two more minutes. He inhaled deeply, appreciating again how much easier it was for him to take in air.

This plan could actually work. He leapt up and landed on a fallen log, positioning himself in a fighting-ready stance. When they reached him, he'd be ready. He planned to let Deidara and Hidan through so Sakura could handle them, but that didn't mean he couldn't delay them to give her more of a head start.

Sakura ran in circles. It had the effect of both muddling her trail and giving the impression that she would be easy prey, which she most assuredly *was not*.

And it was time for her to show that to those that thought she would allow herself to be used against her precious people ever again.

She'd fought tooth and nail against Deidara and Sasori when they'd first captured her back in Sendai, and she'd lost. But back then, she'd been hampered by the need to ensure that the civilians weren't harmed, and she'd been taken by surprise. She also hadn't had the advantage of knowing their abilities beforehand.

None of those applied now.

And there was one more thing that tilted this battle in her favour. Here, in this forested area, *she* held the advantage. This was terrain that she'd basically grown up in and that she was highly accustomed to. Deidara, who depended on having open spaces to fly around and launch his projectiles from, would be hampered. From what Itachi had told her, Hidan too was accustomed to having freedom of movement to toss his scythe around.

No, this certainly wasn't like Sendai, and this wasn't like Kasaki either.

Here, Sakura was going to stand her ground, and she was going to *win*.

"Itachi," Sasori growled. "Where is the girl?"

Itachi shrugged lightly. "Around," he said with a casualness he did not feel, Sharingan monitoring his surroundings for any sudden movements or spikes in chakra. His opponents were the sorts arrogant enough to think they did not need to set up an ambush before proceeding to battle, but he wouldn't have put it past them to have laid a trap in this instance. Not when they were dealing with him.

He almost felt a smile tug at his lips as the adrenaline pumped through his body. When was the last time he'd felt so alive, so eager to battle? These might have been his comrades, and he would certainly regret the need to take their lives, as he did whenever he was forced to end a life.

But in this instance, he only felt a cold certainty that he was finally doing *something*. After years of simply sitting by, feeling impotent as he smuggled scraps of information that could not be traced back to him, he finally could *act*. There were no innocents in that clearing. All five of them were criminals, guilty of the worst sort of atrocities.

Together with Sakura, he was going to put the four of them down. And then, Sasuke would complete the job, and remove him from this world as well. He was ready.

He formed the seals for his favourite water dragon bullet jutsu. While a powerful technique, it would be largely ineffective against their abilities. However, it would succeed in getting Hidan and Deidara riled up, and provide him with the cover he needed for the most important part of his strategy. Concurrently, he bit his thumb to summon his crows to form a crow clone.

Sure enough, Kakuzu threw up a wall of earth to stop the water dragon. Unfazed, Itachi began tossing a barrage of shuriken at them as his crow clone circled around to come on them from behind.

Again, the shuriken themselves could not hurt his opponents. Deidara, standing on his clay bird, simply moved out of range, while Sasori used his tail and Hidan his scythe to bat the shuriken away. Kakuzu used a wind jutsu to blow them aside.

The important matter, however, was how he was able to use his shuriken throws to maneuver his opponents precisely where he wanted them, separating Deidara and Hidan from Kakuzu and Sasori. Hidan needed a wide arc to be able to use his scythe effectively, and he moved away from Sasori and Kakuzu, who were able to deal with the shuriken from where they stood. Itachi took advantage of the small gap to herd them further apart, even as Kakuzu narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

When Itachi judged that the separation was sufficient, he had his clone begin attacking Hidan and Deidara, while he himself took on Kakuzu and Sasori. Eventually, as he'd expected, his clone dissipated, exploding into a murder of crows.

"You think you're so much better than me, un?" Deidara demanded, incensed, as Hidan snarled, "I'll teach you to throw a fucking clone at me!"

Itachi immediately formed another clone to hold them off as they leapt toward him, which only increased their agitation. He allowed a smirk to cross his face.

"He's stalling," Kakuzu hissed. Itachi frowned, suppressing the triumph he felt that his opponents had allowed themselves to be so neatly maneuvered. "He's keeping us distracted with weak techniques he knows won't work against us so that we won't go after the girl!"

“Who fucking cares?” Hidan demanded. “It’s not like she can get that far anyway! We’ll sacrifice this asshole to Jashin-sama, and then we’ll go track her down easy.”

“Do not underestimate her!” Sasori called out. “It took the two of us to capture us in Sendai, and she was caught unawares then. Now, with prior warning, she will be harder to subdue!”

“Yeah, yeah, so we’ll go as a group of four! Stop being such a fucking pussy!” Hidan yelled, cutting through Itachi’s clone with a scythe.

Kakuzu blew a gigantic gust of wind at Hidan, pushing him away from Itachi. “You will go after the girl *right now*, or the next one will chop your head off and I won’t stitch it back on until you’ve learned a thing or two about proper strategy!”

Muttering about fucking assholes who thought they knew better than everyone else, Hidan took off.

“You’d better go with him, Kakuzu. Knowing him, he might very well sacrifice the girl, and we’ll all have to face Leader-sama’s wrath,” Sasori warned.

With a low oath, Kakuzu turned to follow Hidan. Itachi carefully tracked Kakuzu’s movements and aimed Amaterasu at a spot near his head, making it appear as if it was through sheer luck that it had missed passing through Kakuzu’s head.

“I am your opponent,” he called out. “I will not hold back simply because you allowed yourself to be distracted. It would simply mean your vessel is inferior to mine.” As Kakuzu engaged with Itachi again, Sasori glanced around wildly. Seeing Deidara standing on his bird, preparing his clay explosive, he called out.

“Deidara, go after the girl.”

“Sasori no danna, *you* go after the girl if you’re so concerned. I have a score to settle with Itachi, un!”

“Deidara,” Sasori growled. “*Go after the girl*. I will not allow you to sabotage the mission for the sake of your petty grudge.” As Deidara prepared to shoot back a response, Sasori continued. “Don’t you have a score to settle with the girl as well?”

Apparently that was enough to persuade Deidara, for he too turned and followed Sakura’s trail.

Itachi felt relief permeate his entire being. He'd been counting on Sasori's cautious and logical mind to reason out that Deidara would stand little chance against Itachi, and hence would be better suited to go after Sakura. The element he'd been unable to predict was whether Deidara would allow himself to be convinced to pursue Sakura.

No matter the outcome of the battle, he was satisfied with how he'd maneuvered them. Just as he'd predicted, his opponents had no sense of teamwork, each leaving the other to fend for themselves, and to win or lose by their own strengths. It would have made more sense for Sasori to cover Kakuzu so that he could disengage from Itachi – had he decided on that course of action, Itachi was extremely certain that he could not have held Kakuzu back.

As the lone wolves they were, none of them even thought to question that Itachi might have let Hidan and Deidara through on purpose. Why would they? They barely trusted their own partners to have their backs on missions. Kakuzu had gone so far as to kill multiple partners out of sheer annoyance. It didn't even occur to them that Itachi would count on someone else to handle things for him.

A month ago, he might not have. He would have been as reluctant to trust someone else as they were. But this was just one more way in which Sakura had touched his life and changed him for the better. With her insistence on questioning his plans and carrying an equal part in all their plotting, with her nerves of steel and unshakeable courage, she'd forced him to acknowledge her as a true partner. An equal. And as much as he wished he could protect her, he knew that to do so would be to deny her strength. That would hurt her far more than any physical blow ever could.

It's in your hands now, my love. Be safe.

As the minutes passed, the pit in Sakura's stomach grew heavier. It had been almost ten minutes. She would have expected Hidan and Deidara to have reached her by now. She'd already set up her ambush, and she was ready.

With each second, her certainty that she'd been wrong to trust Itachi grew and grew. Should she leave? Should she return to him? What if the stubborn ass of a man really was taking on all four of them? Would her arrival distract him and put him in danger? Would he –

Thankfully, at that moment, she heard the sounds of something crashing through the undergrowth of the forest, and plenty of cussing.

Inner Sakura almost peeked out with interest, wanting to remember those words. Sakura shoved her back. She needed to *focus*.

Soon enough, Hidan and Deidara came into view. She smirked as she noted how low their guards were – once again, they’d underestimated her. Deidara knew first-hand just how dangerous she could be, and he’d still fallen for the clone she’d created, hiding within a poorly crafted genjutsu, clutching at a swollen ankle. The fool actually slid off the clay bird he stood on to strap clay cuffs around the clone’s wrists.

Honestly, as if any shinobi worth their salt would be stopped by something as simple as a sprained ankle!

It almost rankled, but she forced herself to let her irritation go and focus on the situation. Their low opinion of her served her well.

Leaping off the branch she’d been perched on – they hadn’t even bothered to *look around*, she’d wasted time and chakra setting a more powerful genjutsu on her own hiding space for nothing – she plunged downwards, aiming for Hidan. She had to make sure that scythe was no longer a part of the equation.

Her first blow hit the arm with which he wielded his weapon, and broke his bones. She leapt back as he cursed and waited for his bones to mend themselves. It was time to do it again.

A satisfied smile grew on her face as she flung kicks and punches at Hidan. Kami, she’d *missed* this. The looks on her opponents’ faces as they realized they’d been had, the sheer delight of swinging her fists and raining devastation on her foes. This, a good, simple fight, was what she was made for. Not the games of scheming and maneuvering that had become her daily life since she’d been captured.

Hidan roared, swinging his scythe to bat her away. Sakura whirled around a tree, and as his scythe followed her, it stuck fast into the tree trunk. Cursing, Hidan yanked it out, destroying the tree in the process.

After two more attempts to catch Sakura with his scythe ended with it buried in a tree, Hidan elected to leave it buried, and began dodging her blows instead.

“What’s wrong with you? You can regenerate, so why are you dodging?” Deidara demanded, echoing Sakura’s thoughts as he clambered back on to his bird.

“Because getting hit fucking hurts, you asshole! Come down here and I’ll break your arm, see if you’ll stay still and take it!”

Sakura suppressed a smirk. She hadn’t even needed to pull out a genjutsu – they were already arguing, and focusing on each other rather than on her. Their overconfidence and their rashness was making them, and Hidan especially, sloppy.

In the meantime, she continued keeping her awareness trained on Deidara. She had to time this right. Based on what Itachi had known of their abilities, she needed the timing to be exact if she had any chance in hell of pulling this off. Itachi had told her that he believed there was a limit to Hidan’s regeneration, telling her of how Kakuzu had once beheaded him to keep him from mutilating a body Kakuzu wanted to collect a bounty on, and that Kakuzu had needed to reattach his body to his head.

Deidara’s clay birds came closer, hovering around her. Based on what she’d observed of him in Sendai, he preferred to surround his opponents with around five birds before setting one off, creating a serial explosion as each successive bird was set off by the one next to it. And this time, she wouldn’t need to shove the chakra out of them before they exploded. There were no civilians to be harmed.

In fact, she *needed* these to explode. If she was right...

Just as the fifth bird emerged from his hand and began flying towards her, Sakura let out a savage cry and threw herself at Hidan, wrapping her arms and legs around him. At the same time, she released the chakra reserves she’d spent the past few weeks storing into her seal, and activated the Creation Rebirth jutsu. The reserves she had now were pitiful in comparison to the huge reserves she’d had prior to her capture, but she didn’t need that much. She didn’t need to survive a battlefield for *hours*. She just needed to survive that one blast –

And at that moment, the birds began exploding. She hissed through her teeth as entire chunks of flesh disintegrated and immediately began growing back, and noted that the reserves she’d built up were depleting faster than she’d expected. Wasn’t he supposed to be using non-lethal force? These bombs would surely have killed her if she hadn’t had the Creation Rebirth jutsu running.

Please let this work. I don’t think I have enough chakra left for another maneuver like this.

Finally, Sakura stood, blissfully whole, surrounded by the

dismembered remains of what had once been Hidan. She ignored the screams from his still functioning head as her chest heaved.

That worked. That actually worked. Itachi was right – they really have no sense of caring for their comrades or any sense of teamwork.

She could ignore Hidan now. He'd been the bigger threat, and he'd been dealt with. Now, she needed to focus her energies on dealing with Deidara. It would not be easy – he was a long-range fighter, and so was a poor match-up for her. But Itachi had given her the exact knowledge she needed to deal with him.

She pulled her lips back in a snarl. One down, one to go.

Itachi swore internally as he weaved and danced to avoid the multiple barrages of elemental projectiles from the masks. He hadn't been entirely truthful when he'd told Sakura that she would handle Hidan and Deidara because of their emotional reactivity. It had also been because those two were the ones whose abilities he knew best. He knew almost nothing about Kakuzu, and knew little about Sasori's army of puppets.

It was a pity indeed that Sasori was a coward through and through. His mortality frightened him more than anything else. And so, once Itachi had managed to get his Third Kazekage puppet hit by a lightning strike from one of the masks, Sasori had retreated, his confidence shaken. Itachi could no longer count on Sasori's puppets to intercept any strikes meant for him.

He dodged yet another barrage of projectiles. Kakuzu was not a good match-up for him – the shadowy masked figures were somehow able to give him control over all the nature transformations at the same time, negating Itachi's skill in performing elemental ninjutsu. He'd also quickly realized that the masked figures were best defeated by big, flashy, jutsus – the sorts which Itachi usually abhorred, and ignored in favour of more precise jutsus that allowed him to dispatch opponents with minimal effort.

And it didn't help that Sasori sent a different puppet at him each time he sensed Itachi's focus shift more completely to Kakuzu. Itachi had lost track of just how many times he'd been forced to use Amaterasu to destroy a puppet. His eyes stung from the effort, but he couldn't risk drawing his attention away from either opponent to wipe the tears and blood away. Even a split-second could give them the opening they needed.

He wished he could have just used Amaterasu on the masks, but they moved far too quickly. Even with his enhanced sight, he couldn't hit them. As it was, parts of the forest were already blazing, and Itachi could not risk the flames spreading. He had no idea how far Sakura had gotten, and if she would be safely out of the flames' reach.

He supposed he could have used Susano'o, but using that jutsu had always caused him to collapse immediately afterward. He wasn't sure how much of that was due to his own body's weakness, and how much was due to the level of chakra the move took. Collapsing was not a risk he was willing to take. Not when it would leave his opponents free to pursue Sakura.

Sakura launched a kunai that she'd prepared according to Itachi's suggestion at Deidara. He dodged it easily, but that didn't matter. She just needed it to get close enough to him for her to use it as a conduit to reach his nervous system. It ensured that she would have a shorter distance to manipulate chakra strings through.

She sighed in relief as she managed to send her chakra through his nervous system. Soon, the genjutsu would activate, and then –

“Kai!” he shouted, and immediately dismissed her genjutsu. Sakura felt almost paralysed with fear. She'd barely started the genjutsu, and it worked through direct brain stimulation. There should have been no way for him to dismiss it as he did a normal genjutsu.

“Bet you didn't know I was recruited into Akatsuki by Itachi, mmm?” he shouted, as the mouths in his hands continued to shape more clay birds that he sent zooming toward her. Sakura found herself resorting to the same tactics she'd used against him in their previous battle, using a medical technique that usually functioned as a siphon to shove the chakra out of his birds, causing misshapen lumps of clay to fall harmlessly to the ground. This was hardly the sort of thing that would hand her a victory – it would delay him for a short while, at best – but she needed that delay to come up with another plan of action.

“He used that Sharingan of his on me, un. I *lost* to him and he didn't even lift a finger. I swore I'd get revenge.” His eyes narrowed, then. “I've been training since then to be able to face off against *Uchiha Itachi*. Your pitiful genjutsu can't match up to the artistry of his, yeah!”

Oh. So it wasn't an issue with her genjutsu itself – it was just that he had built up a resistance to genjutsu in general out of a ridiculous

grudge. That was fine. That made sense. But it also meant there was a chance he'd managed to give himself a resistance to the offensive jutsus that she'd previously used against him as well.

She had to come up with something new. Before he decided to just fly out of range and bomb the entire forest. She was lucky he hadn't done that already. Lucky she wasn't already dead.

Fuck, this isn't the time to have a breakdown! Focus!

She had no idea how Itachi was holding up in his fight, and she needed to get there to support him as soon as she could. He'd trusted in her to have his back, and *she would have it*.

She ran up a nearby tree and launched herself off it, hurtling towards Deidara at top speed. If she couldn't fight against him using long-range tactics, then she damn well would make it into a close-quarters fight instead.

Let's see how well he fares when he can't risk blowing himself up too, Inner agreed with a snarl.

Sakura landed on the clay bird and began grappling with Deidara. The smirk never left his face as he countered each of her moves, and the mouths on his hands continued to work away at producing his explosives. On catching Sakura's expression, he laughed.

"Art is an explosion, mm! You're wrong if you think I wouldn't hesitate to blow myself up to bring you down! I'll be dead, yeah, but I'll be *art*, and that's what matters."

What was *up* with this guy? He was ridiculously obsessed with the idea of art. And besides, wasn't he supposed to be trying to capture her, not kill her? She recalled then how he'd mentioned when she'd first been formally introduced to the Akatsuki that she had been, what was it? *A living piece of art*.

"You'd really destroy someone you called a living piece of art?" she demanded.

"Of course, yeah. Art is something that only exists in the instant. Especially living pieces – they're never the same as they were. They're always changing, yeah. And there's nothing better than to watch that living piece of art explode in its moment of triumph, preserved only in fragile memory, un."

Sakura blinked. That was almost beautiful. And utterly incongruent to the situation they were in, with her still trying to stop him from making those damn birds, but it was so tough to even connect –

A thought occurred to her, then. *He needed his hands to make his bombs.* She was sure of it. She hadn't seen him pull them from anywhere else.

She shaped her chakra into a scalpel, as she did when she was performing surgery, and slashed at his right hand. He reacted quickly enough that she didn't manage to get the entire hand, and only managed to chop off two of his fingers.

She didn't even have a moment to feel triumphant or wonder if it had worked. Almost instantly, two fingers emerged from the mouth on his left hand. He didn't even appear to need to spend time attaching them – they seemed to instantly stick. Sakura immediately leapt back onto the tree, trying to regroup. How much clay did he have anyway? Did he have a limited supply, or was he capable of generating more on his own?

Deidara eyed her with a sneer as she watched him, willing her brain to come up with something, anything, that she could use. A thought occurred to her. It could still work. She'd just have to be savvier about it this time.

She launched off the tree, and leapt back onto his bird. As she generated the chakra scalpels again, he laughed sardonically. "You really think that will work again, un?"

Ignoring him, she slashed at his hand again. He didn't even bother to dodge this time, and Sakura went for the nerves instead of trying to cut off the entire hand.

He froze as he realized that he could no longer feel his right hand, and Sakura took advantage of his shock to slash the nerves on his other hand as well.

Deidara fell back, staring up at her with astonishment. "For all your talk of art being something living, evolving, and growing, you didn't expect *me* to change my tactics. You expected me to continue as I had been. I'd say that makes you a hypocrite, wouldn't you?"

He inclined his head almost respectfully. "It would, un. Do what you're going to do. It would be an honour to die here. Always thought I'd go out in an explosion, but guess I need to change too, hmm?"

She quickly scanned his body with chakra. He didn't seem the type to just... surrender. Her eyes widened as she realized that his chest cavity contained another mouth and that it was quickly munching away at yet more clay. There was no way she could dodge or heal herself from a blast of that magnitude. She immediately began leaping across the trees, intent on putting as much distance as possible between herself and Deidara, thankful that shishou had trained her well in fleeing.

She'd protested at the time that it felt cowardly, but shishou had beat that thought out of her. "You are the last resort for any team you're with!" she'd snarled as she pelted Sakura with boulders. "If fleeing is what it takes for you to get reinforcements and return to heal them, give them even the smallest fighting chance, then that is damn well what you will do!"

She channelled as much chakra as she could to her feet to propel her further and faster, disregarding the destruction it wrought on the trees. But Deidara just continued pursuing her, and Sakura almost slapped her forehead in exasperation as she realized that he would be able to control when he detonated the bomb. God, she was an idiot.

She went to the ground and put up a wall of earth around her. From what Itachi had told her, it wouldn't do much to protect her from the explosion. But it would give her cover. She bit her thumb, summoned Katsuyu, and took shelter within her body.

When she finally heard the explosion around her, she waited a few minutes to allow the debris to settle down before she dismissed Katsuyu and took down the walls. She *thought* that the move was one that carried equal danger to the user as it did to the target, but she still needed to be sure. She couldn't get careless.

When she found the scattered parts of Deidara's body, she buried them. There would be little Konoha could learn from his body, torn apart as it was. Hidan's head she took with her, though, even as it cussed all the way. As long as Hidan was capable of speech, he would be a threat. Who knew what sort of knowledge he could promise to anyone who might be tempted to help him put his body back together? No. He had to die, and she was pretty sure Itachi's Amaterasu could do it.

She allowed Hidan to continue speaking and cursing as she neared the clearing where she'd separated from Itachi. She wasn't that good at

masking her chakra presence, but with luck, whoever Itachi was fighting would assume it was Hidan making his way back. Thankfully, Hidan seemed more focused on insulting her and demanding she re-attach his head to the remains of his body than on actually trying to warn his comrades. She shook her head in disgust. No wonder Itachi had such trouble trusting, when these were the people he'd been surrounded by for the past few years.

She placed his head on the ground, far enough that only his voice – and not his actual words – could be heard, and circled around to enter the clearing from another direction. She'd enter cautiously, she decided. She hadn't forgotten Itachi's warning about his use of lethal tactics, and it really would be tragic if she survived both being captured by the Akatsuki and facing three of them head-to-head, only to die from a stray fireball.

As she neared the clearing, she felt her heart drop into her stomach. Sasori was... He wasn't participating in the fight, but he was inching closer and closer to Itachi. Itachi didn't appear to have noticed – he appeared entirely too focused on his fight against two amorphous black figures in masks. Sakura noticed three shattered masks on the ground. Kakuzu's jutsu, she supposed.

But in any case, the real threat was Sasori. He was as yet uninjured, and his *tail was still intact*. She realized with horror that Itachi had told her that while he knew Sasori was a puppermaster, he was not sure what all the components of his puppetry actually *did*.

He was almost within range of Itachi. She had to do *something*. Whatever hit Itachi would surely be coated with a fatal poison. But what –

She gasped as it occurred to her. She had no idea if it would work, but it was the only way she could think of to finish Sasori in one blow.

Pulling one of her healing seals from her pack, she suppressed her chakra signature as much as she could, and *ran* up from behind Sasori. It just needed to make contact with one part of his body –

He sensed her then, and the tail whipped up to shoot its supply of senbon at her. With a snarl, Sakura punched with all her might, breaking his outer shell, and slammed the seal down onto his back.

Immediately, the seal activated, and Sasori began gasping and choking like a fish out of water. The seal was designed to heal. To revert a body to its natural state. And for Sasori, whose entire body had been

replaced with constructs of wood and metal? There was a lot of healing to be done.

Sakura watched as the seal worked to expel everything that would be considered foreign material. It stripped away everything, until all that was left was a heart that somehow, against all odds, was still beating. She reached down and crushed it.

She looked up to find Itachi watching her, two more masks having joined the three already on the ground. Kakuzu was nowhere to be seen. Dead, then.

She gasped at the trails of blood spinning from his eyes. He seemed indifferent to them, and pulled her into his arms, kissing her forehead.

“You’re incredible,” he breathed. “You – all three of them?”

She ducked her head, embarrassed. “It was mostly tricks,” she said quietly.

He tilted her chin up so she was looking right into his eyes. “Sakura. We are shinobi. *Everything* we do involves trickery. That does not diminish your accomplishment one bit.”

“But – “

“You said that many underestimate you. How do you expect them to believe in you when you downplay your own triumphs? We teach others how to treat us by how we treat ourselves.”

She nodded, more out of a desire to end the conversation than out of any real acceptance of his words. She needed to look at his eyes, and she was worried about the damage the battle would have done to his internal systems –

His lips came crashing down on hers, and all thought flew out the window then. They were alive, and they were together.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

I don't normally request reviews, but I'd really appreciate any feedback you guys can give on this chapter! Please let me know what worked and what didn't work for you. I really want to improve at writing fight scenes 😊

Joys and Sorrows

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Itachi watched the rising and falling of Sakura's chest as she lay in his arms. She was truly amazing. At this point, she'd taken down four members of Akatsuki by herself. And somehow, she still considered herself weak.

He felt a rush of anger then, towards his brother, towards Naruto, towards Kakashi. Towards everyone who had ever made this incredible woman think she was anything less than she was.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head before beginning the diagnostic technique. It had almost become a form of comfort to him – to simply know she was alright. He smiled, beginning to visualize her body with his chakra.

He paused as he sensed the residue of what appeared to be a chakra shield around the vital organs in her abdomen. For it to still be there, hours later... He frowned as he calculated, and realized just how strong the shield would have needed to be when she'd put it up. It made sense, he supposed – Hidan did enjoy watching his victims' intestines spill out.

He prodded further, worried that she might have ignored a wound to herself in favour of healing him. As much as she accused him of being self-sacrificing, he knew that she was the same.

He sucked in a breath as he detected an irregularity in her chakra. It almost appeared... knotted. That was the best word he had to describe the way it curled in on itself, forming a globular shape instead of flowing as it should. It was a small one, to be sure, but the way it appeared to greedily suck in the chakra flowing through the rest of her system was worrying. He could not sense any of the chakra that entered that knot leaving it.

Could her battle with Hidan and Deidara have impacted her chakra? He didn't think either of them used any techniques that would manipulate chakra in that manner, but he had to admit that they could have had something that would have left a residual effect. All he had were close guesses about the extents of their abilities – they could

very well have hidden techniques he had no hint about.

Frowning, he separated himself from her and pulled out one of the texts she had stashed away in her sealing scroll. That particular one had a description of almost every possible irregularity that could be spotted, and she'd recommended that he use it as a reference as he continued to familiarize himself with viewing the human body through chakra. He flipped through it until he reached a diagram displaying what he'd seen.

And froze as the words registered.

No. It was not possible. Could not be. This...

The scroll fluttered from his hands to land harmlessly on the floor as his hands trembled with the weight of the realization, and his thoughts flew wildly from one possibility to the next.

He had to be wrong. Had to. The very thought that this could be real was too much for him to consider. He reached over to perform the diagnostic again, and felt a sinking in his stomach as he got the exact same result. Picking up the scroll, he glanced through frantically, looking for something else, *anything* else, that could explain what he'd seen.

Eventually, he had to accept the reality of the situation. Tossing the scroll aside, he climbed back into bed with Sakura, and caressed her belly. Tomorrow. They'd deal with this tomorrow. At the moment, they were both still recovering from the chakra exhaustion brought on by the battle. Sakura especially had fought two battles and then immediately completely healed him, despite his protests that he would be alright. Tomorrow, he'd ask her how this could have happened, when that seal she'd told him about on multiple occasions should have prevented this exact situation from occurring.

Tomorrow, he'd deal with the chilling reality that she might have done this on purpose. To simultaneously fulfil his deepest desires, and to make sure he couldn't seek out the death he so desperately craved.

For tonight, he would simply hold his beloved in his arms. For tonight, he'd set aside his fears and worries about what it would mean for them.

He buried his face in her neck, unable to stop the tears from welling up in his eyes.

For tonight, he would bask in the knowledge that she was carrying their child.

For once, Sakura woke peacefully instead of being jerked awake by a nightmare. It seemed chakra exhaustion was good for *something* at least – her body was far too drained to mull over the demons that now haunted her mind.

She opened her eyes to meet Itachi's gaze. He was looking at her in that way of his, that made her feel as if she was the only woman he'd ever seen. Only this time, there was something else there. Something so infinitesimally fragile that it made her heart ache, wondering again if this would be the moment he left.

"Itachi?" she asked tentatively, almost afraid to shatter that moment with words. His hand paused where it had been caressing her belly.

"Sakura," he replied. "Please perform the diagnostic technique on yourself."

She smiled, feeling a sense of relief. He was just worried. It might have irritated her to be so coddled, but his willingness to constantly and openly express his admiration for her abilities meant she could focus on the sheer joy of being so loved.

"I'm fine, Itachi, I promise. I wasn't even really injured. The burns from Deidara's bombs are superficial, and they'll heal soon. I'm just low on chakra. I just need to rest." It was odd that he'd asked her to perform it, though. He normally just performed it himself while she was sleeping – he'd admitted it one night almost shyly, as if expecting her to yell at him for it.

He didn't return her smile, and Sakura felt tension winding through her.

"Sakura. Please perform the technique."

His sombreness was almost frightening. Was there something she'd missed, some slow-acting poison that Sasori might have coated his body with that was coursing through her veins?

She sat up and performed the technique.

A corner of her mind, one that wasn't shrieking away in horror, noted that it was a very good thing that she was on the bed. She didn't think

she could have maintained her balance had she been standing. Not after learning... this.

She turned to face Itachi, terrified. He'd known. That's why he'd asked her to perform the diagnostic. He'd known, and...

"I don't – Itachi, I don't know how this is even possible," she gasped, desperately needing him to understand. "The seal should have prevented this!"

She tried not to be affected by the relief that flashed across his face upon seeing her own shock. He wasn't wrong to wonder, she told herself. She would have questioned too, had she not known –

It occurred to her, then.

"The seal," she said, looking down at her hands. How could she face him, after she'd been so careless? So stupid? "It deactivates if the flow of chakra to it ever stops."

"As it would have when you were drained of chakra when you were first captured," Itachi finished.

He didn't sound angry. She forced herself to look back up at him. "I'm sorry," she whispered, feeling the tears pool in her eyes. "I talked about that seal so much, you must have thought I was protected. I thought I was protected too. I should have checked, I didn't even think –"

He took her hands in his, drawing slow circles across her knuckles. "It's my responsibility too," he sighed, and he sounded so *tired*. Would she ever be a comfort to him as she wished to be? Would she never stop causing him trouble?

Almost unconsciously, her hands came to rest on her abdomen, Itachi's hands still covering them. Realistically, she knew that the pregnancy was still in extremely early stages – the foetus would be nothing more than a microscopic mass of cells. If Itachi hadn't been running the diagnostic on her so frequently, she wouldn't even have known for at least another month or two.

Still, she couldn't help but feel as if she'd already connected with it. She and Itachi had made a baby together. As inconvenient as the timing was, what with them running from Akatsuki and Itachi's death wish, she couldn't help but hope. Would this be finally what gave Itachi a reason to live?

"I could have asked. Should have asked," Itachi went on. "In any case, what's done is done. I'd planned for us to travel a little more slowly as we both recovered from chakra exhaustion, but we cannot take that risk anymore. We need to get you to Konoha as soon as possible so that you can deal with it."

She recoiled, pushing his hands away, covering her abdomen almost protectively. "What do you mean, *deal* with it?" she demanded, feeling her heart beat faster. She hadn't thought he would – that he would ever say or even *consider* something like that.

'What did you expect?' the snide voice inside her head that constantly whispered her fears to her piped up. 'He killed his entire clan, and you still don't know why. You just assumed he had a good reason for it. Maybe he just hates everyone who carries Uchiha blood.'

No. That could not be true. She forced herself to recall the sorrow in his voice as he'd told her he wanted to give her children. The tears he'd shed on the anniversary of the massacre. The way he'd trembled as she'd made him recollect how he slaughtered his own flesh and blood.

There was no way that he wouldn't want this child.

"Sakura," he said, and he sounded so lost, so forlorn, that she almost wanted to take her words back. But she forced herself to remain strong. She needed these answers. She continued to watch him. Waiting him out.

"What kind of life would this child have, Sakura? You cannot hide who its father is. Not with how distinctive the Uchiha features will be. Not when they activate their Sharingan. And what then? Would you condemn our child to be sneered at as the mistake of a traitor who allowed herself to be seduced by an enemy of the village? Even if you defended your own reputation and said you were forced, our child would still be shunned as a child of rape. You would still be viewed as foolish, perhaps even treasonous, for choosing to keep it."

His voice was so heated. She couldn't remember him ever sounding this angry before. Not even when he'd thought she was attempting suicide. Her mind slowly sorted through his words, and realized she finally had the opportunity to ask him what she'd been too scared to.

"You keep saying *you*," she said. "Itachi, do you plan to abandon me? Will you leave me to raise this child alone?"

He froze.

He hadn't meant to reveal so much. He'd just needed her to understand.

As much as he so desperately wanted this child – *his* child, one he thought he'd never have, one they'd created in their expression of love – he couldn't deny that the child would have a difficult life.

And he wouldn't be there. Couldn't. Even if he could bring himself to abandon Sasuke, what kind of father would he make? He'd tried to shape Sasuke into a hero of Konoha, and he'd instead irreparably broken him.

Another wild thought came to him then. He could stay with her for a while. He could evade Sasuke. They could travel around the world, staying two steps ahead of him. Once the child was born and things were a little more stable, he could allow Sasuke to find him and kill him.

He discarded that thought too. He'd already previously dismissed that plan, knowing he couldn't put her through that kind of life, and he wasn't going to follow that plan now. Pregnancy would be difficult enough on her without being constantly on the run, eyes peeled for any sign of pursuit.

No. The only option was for her to get to Konoha, where she'd be safe.

His mind whirled at top speed, thinking of something, anything, that he could say to her.

"The child would be in danger," he said at last. "And you as well, if it became known you were pregnant with my child. If my interpretation of the chakra visualization is right, implantation only occurred yesterday, yes?"

She nodded.

"We still have time," he said. "If you return to Konoha now, and if we separate, it will be a while before you begin showing. Long enough that the child could plausibly be someone else's. You could still be safe."

"You just said there would be no way to deny the child is yours," she said. "Once it's born, it would be pretty obvious who the father is, wouldn't it? Unless you think your lovely little brother would be

willing to claim he's the father. Don't bullshit me, Itachi. *Do you plan on leaving me?*"

It took all his self-control to keep from flinching at the venom in her words. He deserved it, he knew. He spoke, ensuring that no part of the maelstrom of emotions he was drowning was evident in his tone.

"Which is why it would be prudent for you to terminate the pregnancy," he said, every word a kunai through his chest.

He was unbelievable. There were no words to describe the sheer rage and hurt she felt at that moment. He hadn't answered her, she realized. He was doing the same thing yet again – dodging her questions, riling her up so she would forget what she'd been trying to get him to admit to.

She glared at him, eyes stinging. She couldn't even bring herself to care that she was about to cry yet again. She was just so tired. Tired of fighting him at every step, trying to out-think him. And she was still recovering from chakra depletion to boot.

"Just stop, Itachi," she sighed. "I know you want to die. I'm not going to try to stop you or talk you out of it anymore. Do what you want. If nothing I've said so far has gotten through to you, I don't think anything else will. But don't you dare make the mistake of thinking that means I will get rid of this child. We made this child. I may not have expected or planned for it, but I already love it. If that's not something you can get behind, then you might as well just leave me right here. Don't even bother following me to Konoha."

She turned from him then, not wanting to see his expression. She began gathering her things and packing them away. The tears began to fall as she heard the soft tap-tap of his footsteps coming toward her. She tried to steel herself, but they were already flowing and there was little she could do at that point.

His arms came around her, and she felt him rest his chin on top of her head. "I love our child already too," he admitted, and she felt herself shaking. It should have comforted her.

Instead, all she felt was rage.

She spun in his arms, looking up at him. "How could you?" she hissed. "If you feel even a quarter of how I feel for our child, how could you even – you didn't just suggest it or ask me to consider it, Itachi! You

outright told me to abort!”

She'd known that he'd wept before, but she now could see for herself how his eyes glistened. She'd seen him vulnerable, but there was now a sheer fragility that permeated his entire being. As if a single blow would be enough to shatter him into pieces.

“I love our child,” he repeated. “Which is why I would not have it live a condemned life. I know first-hand how painful isolation is, Sakura. Despised by everyone you care for, living life looking over your shoulder, waiting for the blow to fall. And that is the life that child would live. Better for it to never know that sort of agony.”

“I would love them! I would protect them. And this entire thing is based on a hypothetical! Do you honestly think I'd allow any of my friends to shun my child? Or allow anyone to speak one word against them? And if you only came back with me, there wouldn't even be a *need* for such a thing! We could clear your name. They wouldn't ever need to suffer. But no, you're so fucking stubborn, you won't even consider the alternative. Won't even consider the pain our child will go through when they ask why they don't have a father, and I have to tell them that their father didn't love them enough to live for them!”

She realized then that she'd utterly lost her temper, and she couldn't bring herself to care that she'd broken all her resolutions to persuade him with gentleness and sweetness. Not when his goals brought back all the memories of her own father's terrible choice. How had she fallen for a man who would do the exact same thing to her?

Her words struck him like a blow. He'd been so caught up in thinking about his own sorrow, his own loss, that he hadn't even considered how it must seem to her. A father, choosing death over his child.

Yet, what could he say? There was nothing that could make this better. Nothing short of making a promise that he wasn't capable of keeping.

Her face hardened as she watched him, clearly reading his decision.

“I'm heading to Konoha,” she said coldly. “It's up to you whether or not you want to come with me. It doesn't make a difference to me either way.”

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to Chillaxin101, who guessed that there would be an ItaSaku junior back at Chapter 21!

I once again had pity on you guys for this chapter - spent a lot of time contemplating whether to cut it off at the point where Itachi realizes Sakura's pregnant ☐ but I do think the point I ended up cutting it off at might be worse. I'm so glad I already know what's going to happen because I wouldn't want to sit around waiting for the next chapter! It's about to be a wild ride. I'm not sure if this next arc will match up to the Akatsuki confrontation, but I sure as heck am going to try.

The Hope That Would Not Be Extinguished

Chapter Notes

Sorry for missing last week's update - things got hectic again 🙄
Moving forward, I really don't know if I'll be able to stick to any kind of consistent update schedule. I'll certainly continue to try, but it's looking more and more unlikely. But I do promise you guys that this story will absolutely be completed! It's been living in my head for far too long, and it's such a relief to release each chapter into the world and set it free!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura hadn't really meant the words she'd flung at Itachi. She'd just wanted to hurt him as he'd hurt her. Yet, as his face crumpled in the instant before it slid back into his expressionless mask, she felt like a monster.

She shoved the guilt down as far as it would go. *He* was the one who was ready to leave her and their unborn child at the first sign of trouble. *He* was the one who always turned to death as his immediate solution – his death, their child's death.

Silently, she continued packing her things as he just watched her. Finally, just when she'd resigned herself to the thought that she truly had lost him forever, that he was going to let her leave without a second glance, he spoke.

“Sakura,” he said, and the sheer pain in his voice cut her like a knife. She'd put that pain there. She'd vowed to herself to love him and support him through everything, and she'd hurt him.

He deserves it, Inner snarled. Sakura waited for Brainwashed Sakura to pipe up in Itachi's defense, and felt the hollow ache in her chest grow as she remembered that Brainwashed Sakura had already dissipated.

“May I – Would you allow me to continue to accompany you?”

Had she ever heard him sound so unsure? Kami, what had she *done*?

Yet, she couldn't deny the rage that came bubbling up from that pit of lava that was her stomach. He wanted to *accompany* her, did he? For what fucking purpose? So he could assure himself she was safe and be on his own merry way to commit suicide, uncaring of her heartbreak,

of how he too had left her after promising he wouldn't?

Only death can take me from your side. She almost wanted to laugh at the bitter irony. He had a way with words, alright.

The two warring emotions gripped each other in a vise, and Sakura was left with emptiness. She opened her mouth, and found that no words would come out. Numbly, she nodded.

As furious as she was, she wasn't ready to let go of him yet. As much as she wanted to beat some sense into him, as much as the very sight of his face made her sick inside, she still wanted every extra minute she could spend with him. To know she was loved, however poorly, for just a little while longer.

He'd regained control over his expressions, she realized. There was no change in his face. He stuck out his left hand, watching it intently, and Sakura wondered what he was doing.

And then, his eye twitched, and the ring on his finger burst into black flame. His teeth clenched as the greedy flames consumed his finger as well, but he didn't make a sound.

By sheer superhuman effort, Sakura forced herself to stay still until the fire went out, having consumed exactly what it wanted to, and she ran to him and passed her hand over the blackened stump where his ring finger had been.

"You, you, you reckless idiot!" she wept. She was incredibly skilled at healing, but there were limits to what she could do as well, and regrowing limbs – even small ones like fingers – were beyond her. It was lost forever. "What were you thinking!"

He met her gaze easily this time, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "The rings allow the wearer's location to be tracked. If you had not permitted me to come with you, I would have gone in the opposite direction, made sure I lead Pain away from you. But since you have allowed me to be with you a little longer, I made sure we could not be easily found."

"At the cost of your *finger*?" she cried, as she finished healing the stump where once had been a finger with a deft and delicate touch.

His eyes darkened. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, Sakura," he vowed, and while that normally would have sent her heart leaping, all she could think at that moment was that there was something he

wouldn't do for her: he wouldn't live for her.

As they travelled, Sakura couldn't get the image of Itachi burning off his finger out of her mind. She kept recalling how triumphant he'd looked once he'd accomplished it. He hadn't displayed the slightest hint of regretting his decision. And if she hadn't learned how to read him so well, she would have thought it was utterly painless.

But she did know. And it made her wonder just how much of his own internal pain he was hiding. She remembered again just how much he carried on his shoulders, and she felt yet another twinge at just how selfish she'd been, making things all about her. She did her best to hold on to her anger, but it had burned itself out. Now, all that was left was an emptiness where once lived her foolish dreams of what a lifetime with Itachi would be like.

They'd been barely travelling for four hours when Itachi decided that they would take a break. Despite his words about needing to rush to Konoha, they still travelled at a slower pace. He was watching her like a hawk, and the instant Sakura felt herself beginning to tire, he called for a halt. They sat in the shade of a tree, leaning back against its trunk, and Itachi's arm hesitantly came around her, holding her close.

He was worried about her, she realized, marvelling that he hadn't offered to carry her. He must know that her pride would be hurt by such an offer, and he did what he could to respect her even while caring for her.

It hurt. He was so perfect for her. He was everything she could have ever asked for. Was it fate, that she would only have him for a short amount of time?

Somehow, over the hours that had passed since their departure, she'd stopped thinking of his imminent death as a possibility, and as a certainty. She didn't have the ability to make Itachi want to live. Neither did their child. That was a decision only he could make for himself.

Her hands again drifted to her abdomen. She would do *everything* in her power to ensure that their child grew up healthy and happy. Not only was it hers to love, it would be all she had left of him once he left her. She wondered then if her child would follow in its father's footsteps. Whether it would one day leave her too.

She looked up and met his eyes, seeing the undisguised longing in them as he watched her stroke her belly. She sighed. She'd focused so much on her own hurt, her own feelings of abandonment, that she'd neglected to think just how much pain he must be in as well. He'd suffered so much, more than she could ever understand. What right did she have to decide what he would do with his life? If he wanted to end it, didn't he deserve that much choice, regardless of how she felt about it?

She took his hand and placed it against her stomach, and leaned her head on his shoulder. Finally allowing herself to sink into his embrace.

"I'm sorry for everything I said," she murmured. "It just hurts me, when I think of you leaving. I love you so much, and even an eternity with you wouldn't be enough, but I'm constantly wondering now whether the time we have left will be measured in months or weeks or days. And I can't stop myself from wondering why I'm not enough to make you want to stay."

He cradled her face in his hands. His thumb stroked across her cheeks, wiping the tears that she hadn't realized had begun to fall. She *hated* that she wept so much around him. And she couldn't even blame pregnancy hormones – it was far too early for that.

"I never wanted you to know it," he admitted. "Never wanted you to be hurt by it. I told myself time and time again not to underestimate you, and I did it again. I'm sorry too, Sakura."

She bit back her frustration. Screaming at him again wouldn't help. Wouldn't stand any chance of changing his mind. And she didn't *want* to. She wanted him to choose her. And that meant she would have to work through whatever this obsession with death was together with him.

"Can you at least tell me why?" she asked. "What could be so important that you absolutely need to die?"

He remained silent.

"Please, Itachi," she begged. "Just give me *something*. Please. For all those nights when I'll lie awake missing you. Just give me something so I know you didn't actually want to leave me. Give me something to tell our child. I'm not going to try to stop you anymore. I just want some answers. Please."

His breath came in ragged pants. The words were on the tip of his tongue. From the moment she'd asked him why she wasn't enough, he'd wanted to tell her everything. How she and their child were making him second-guess all his plans, how desperately he wanted to live, to have that life she promised him.

And now that she'd told him she would no longer stand against him, he felt a new hole tear open in his heart. He *wanted* her to fight him. He wanted her to force him to live, so he could convince himself that if only she hadn't interfered, he would have followed through with his plans. He wanted to place the responsibility on her shoulders, he realized.

And that was utterly unacceptable.

He would confess everything. She was going to travel through the deepest pits of hell, all for her love for him. She would suffer the disdain of the villagers, would face backlash from Sasuke for carrying his despised brother's child. The least he owed her was the truth.

"I will have your word, first," he said quietly. "You will speak of this to no one except our child. And Sasuke, especially, must never learn the truth."

She nodded fervently. This was everything she hadn't dared to hope for. She'd thought he'd just shut her down again.

"I swear," she said, hoping he didn't hear how her voice shook, even as she knew he did. Of course he did. He noticed everything. That was one of the things she loved so much about him.

He opened his mouth, and closed it again. And then opened it again.

"This is... difficult for me," he said. "These are secrets I thought I would carry to my grave."

She nodded in what she hoped was an encouraging manner, and covered his hands with her smaller ones. Her index finger stroked the stump where the Akatsuki ring had previously resided. She didn't need more proof than that of his love for her. Now, she needed to show that she was worthy of it.

"Take all the time you need," she said. "I'm here."

After what felt like hours, but was probably just a few minutes, he

finally began speaking. “You saw some of my experiences of the massacre.” She nodded.

“You’ve already guessed a lot of what it entailed. It wasn’t on a whim, as I portrayed to Sasuke. The Uchiha were planning a coup. One that would necessarily result in the loss of hundreds of innocent civilian lives. One that would weaken Konoha, set the stage for a civil war, perhaps even spark another shinobi world war. I was ordered to stop the coup.”

“By killing every single Uchiha,” she whispered. He’d been *thirteen* at the time of the massacre. At that age, she’d been crying over skinned knees and worrying about whether Sasuke would notice her. At that age, Itachi had taken on a terrible burden to save countless lives.

It was so unfair.

And yet, she couldn’t help but feel an almost inappropriate surge of triumph. She’d been *right*. He wasn’t a heartless killer. He had a reason for everything he’d done. The Itachi she knew and loved was the real one.

And if there was anything she’d learned about the shinobi world in the time she’d been Tsunade-shishou’s apprentice, it was that ninja were *obsessive* about their record-keeping. Even the most clandestine missions were documented. The paperwork would be hidden, to be sure, but it would *exist*. There was a trail somewhere that would allow his innocence to be proven. Even if he went through with his plan, she could clear his name, and do so without breaking her word to him.

He nodded. “Yes. And it was an order I could not bring myself to complete. I killed everyone. Innocent children, elderly who couldn’t defend themselves. My parents. But I couldn’t bring myself to kill Sasuke. There were plenty of children younger than him, equally innocent. I killed them all. But not Sasuke – and not for any noble reason. It was simply by virtue of the fact that he was my younger brother. That was when I knew I deserved to die for my sins.”

“But *something* made you decide that it was worth it for you to continue living for all these years.”

“It would not be enough for me to simply vanish. Even if my body was found, Sasuke would never find peace.”

She exhaled as it all finally came together. “That’s why you tortured him. Because you wanted to make sure that he would hunt you down

and kill you.”

“Yes. It was supposed to be his triumph. Putting down the psychopath that murdered his entire clan, taking down an S-class missing-nin. He was supposed to become the pride of Konoha.”

She felt her heart clench then, as she realized the magnitude of Itachi’s sacrifice. “You... You manipulated him into hating you,” she said, tears falling again. He sounded so detached, as if he was discussing the weather. How much had he suppressed his pain? “You love him so much, and you made him hate you. You let yourself be labelled a psychopathic clan-killer, all so he would keep his pride in who he is.”

“It was also so he would remain loyal to Konoha. He could not help but have conflicted feelings if he knew that the deaths of everyone he loved was ordered by the upper echelon. But perceiving it as the crazed actions of a power-hungry maniac... That would be something else altogether. He could heal, then. He could get closure after my death. He could move on. He could *live*, and he could restore the Uchiha clan. He was always such a loving, generous, sincere child. He would restore them in a way they’d never existed before.”

“But he’s not that child anymore,” Sakura said, thinking back to her last few encounters with Sasuke. “He defected. He tried to kill me. I can see why you would have thought the plan would work at the time, but what on earth could make you think this is still a good idea?”

Itachi’s head sagged. “I have no way of knowing what will happen,” he sighed. “I am aware that I miscalculated. Badly. But do you understand, Sakura? I’ve already set him down this path. There is no way out for him except through my death. And to turn aside from that now for my own selfishness? To live a life that should never have been mine, after everything I’ve done to Sasuke? How can I do that?”

His voice became even softer then, trembling with the effort to remain composed. “How can I be a father, knowing what I’ve done? I would seek to strengthen our child, and I would break them as I broke Sasuke. Worse, perhaps.” His hand found its way to her abdomen again, and he caressed it.

He lowered his head then, and pushed her skirt and shorts downward to expose a strip of skin. He kissed it, over and over, and Sakura felt a shiver travel down her spine in spite of everything.

“I love our child,” he said, longing colouring his tone. “And that is

why I can never be a part of their life. They will grow better without me there. With only you, with all your love, all your life, all your goodness to guide them.”

Her heart broke yet again. He truly believed everything he was saying. Her hands smoothed over his hair. “You know that’s not true,” she replied. “I’m hardly an angel. I lose my temper so easily, I say things I don’t mean. Hurtful things. I lose perspective and make everything about myself.” He opened his mouth, to rebut her, perhaps, but she placed a finger across his lips.

“I can’t do this alone,” she said. “I need you with me. I need your patience and your kindness. I know you said you would break them. But you didn’t break *me*. You believe in me so completely, and it strengthens me so much. How could I ever think you’d do anything differently for our baby?”

He exhaled, and nuzzled into her belly again. Sakura felt a spot of wetness against her skin, and gently ran her hands through his hair, removing his hair tie so she could comfort him in the way he enjoyed without encumbrance.

“That doesn’t change the fact that I am a killer,” he replied. “I must atone for my sins. My life no longer belongs to me to choose what I wish.”

“So what, it belongs to Sasuke now?” Despite all her reminders to herself to remain calm, Sakura couldn’t prevent the agitation she felt from entering her voice. “You didn’t do it willingly, Itachi! You were *ordered*. You didn’t have a choice. Their deaths aren’t your responsibility to bear.”

He looked up and met her eyes, and Sakura saw that he’d composed himself. There was no trace of emotion on his face. “I could have refused. I could have warned them. I could have taken Sasuke and fled. I could have persuaded them not to go through with it. I could have killed only the ringleaders of the coup, and refused to hurt the rest. There were a million other choices I could have made, Sakura. You say I was ordered, but I still chose to go through with it. I made the choice I thought best, true, but that doesn’t change the fact that I still had the gall to choose their fate. In recompense, my own control over my fate is forfeit. It belongs to the last Uchiha now.”

Sakura shook her head vehemently. Couldn’t he see just how messed up this was? He’d been a *child*, damn it. The village and his family had

forced him to make a terrible choice, one which would have left him with blood on his hands no matter what he did.

“Sasuke isn’t the last Uchiha anymore,” she said, throwing out something, anything, that could change his mind. She’d said she’d let him go, true, but that was before she’d known that even his resolve to die was due to self-sacrifice. Knowing now that he truly wanted to be with her and their child changed things. She didn’t have to fight his own wants anymore – she just needed to deal with his bloody noble sense of obligation.

“My child is an Uchiha too. Doesn’t my child get a say in your fate too?”

He froze in the act of caressing her, and Sakura felt the smidgen of warmth in her chest grow. Did she... Did they actually stand a chance? Could this work?

“You want Sasuke to restore the Uchiha. But given what you know of him, how likely would that be? After everything he’s been through, do you think he’d ever be able to settle down and raise a child? And even if he could, what would he know of Uchiha ways and traditions? He was even more of a child than you were when the massacre happened. You are the *only one* who can keep those alive. You are the only guarantee that the Uchiha will continue to flourish and thrive in service to Konoha. Don’t you owe it to your parents to pass on their name? To not let their line die with you and Sasuke?”

He opened his mouth, and Sakura once again stopped him from speaking. She wasn’t done yet. “I saw it with you, remember? They called you a kind child. At the end, they, they still loved you. How could you believe they would want anything less than for you to live, Itachi? Imagine if our child turned against us. If they were the cause of yours and my deaths. Would you still want anything less than happiness for our child? Do you really think your parents would have wanted anything different for you?”

He pulled her into his arms, and covered her face with kisses. Sakura heard everything he didn’t say, couldn’t say, in those kisses. He was wavering, and for the first time in their conversation, she allowed the hope to begin blooming in her chest.

“I know it’s hard,” she said quietly. “You’ve spent ten years thinking this is going to go a certain way, and to even consider doing things differently must feel like you’re giving up. Like your resolve wasn’t

enough.”

He nodded, and drew in a ragged breath. “Is it... Sakura, I know you’d say anything that came to your mind if you thought it would convince me to change my mind.”

She heard his unasked question. “Of course I would,” she said, smiling even through her tears. Even at his most emotional, his most vulnerable, he was still insanely analytical. “To do any less would be to give up on you. And as much as I tell myself to let you go, I can’t bring myself to do that. But I know now that even though I swore to protect you even from yourself, there’s a limit to what I can accomplish. Living is a choice that you will need to make for yourself everyday. But I just hope you’ll realize that Sasuke needs to make that same decision for himself too, Itachi. You can’t manipulate him into deciding that he’s going to live a happy life. You owe it to him to give him the truth too, to set him free.”

As his shoulders shook with the weight of her words, Sakura leaned up to kiss his forehead, as he had done so many times to her. “I love you,” she said. “And that’s not going to change no matter what you decide. I’ll be hurt and angry if you do decide to go ahead with your plan. But that’s because I love you. And for what it’s worth, I do believe you deserve forgiveness.”

Itachi broke.

Over the course of the time he’d known her, she’d slowly chipped away at his defenses. He’d continually deluded himself into thinking they were just minor cracks, but now, as her love washed over him like a tidal wave, he allowed himself to think for the first time of what his heart wanted.

He allowed himself to dream of a life with Sakura – marrying her, raising their child together. He allowed himself to think of reconciliation with Sasuke, persuading him to return home, of long talks and training sessions and imparting to him everything he knew of the Uchiha family history and tradition. He allowed himself to dream of a new sort of clan, one where the Sharingan was awoken through love instead of loss, where they were taught that hurt didn’t need to turn that love to hatred, because hurt and loss were products of love; taught that the recognition of that fact could be healing.

He thought back to his original plan – how much it had hinged on slim hopes. Hope that he hadn’t broken Sasuke irreparably, that

Konoha would allow him to return in spite of all he'd done, that Sasuke would even want to return, that he'd never discover the extent of Itachi's, and by extension, his family's betrayal. It seemed rather pathetic now, in comparison to the possibility Sakura showed him.

Seeking courage to choose what he wanted, he nuzzled into Sakura's hair, feeling her arms around him, her hands running down his back, her clean herbal scent simultaneously nourishing and energizing him.

There was no real choice to make any longer. He'd already decided. He just needed the resolve to make that choice, to own the responsibility that would come with it.

Pulling back slightly, he lifted Sakura's chin so she was looking into his eyes, and he caressed her cheek. She had always been so beautiful she'd taken his breath away, but now, under the soft afternoon light, he realized that she'd always been the only thing he'd ever needed to make his life worth living again.

He'd been imprisoned, bound by the chains of fate, and she'd set him free.

Just as he opened his mouth to tell her his answer, a voice cut in, all the more unwelcome for how unexpected it was. He hadn't even sensed the approaching chakra, as low on chakra as he himself was.

"Step away from her, and prepare to face your death, Itachi," Sasuke said in a low voice.

Chapter End Notes

This was such a difficult chapter to write. I've been building towards this from the very beginning, and it's still not really how I envisioned it in my mind. Doesn't help that I've gotten so attached to these characters that all the vulnerability they're both displaying just set me crying every time I sat down to write!

This is a huge turning point in Itachi's emotional journey, and I'm wondering even after countless rounds of editing if I've done it justice. I really really hope you guys feel that this chapter works!

Genjutsu Kai

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

No.

This could not be happening.

He'd been wavering, Sakura had been able to see it. The way he'd looked at her, the way he'd held her – he'd been about to say yes to a life with her. She knew it.

And as usual, Sasuke had fucked *everything* up. She felt a surge of anger, burning fiercer than it ever had towards her ex-teammate.

She opened her mouth to speak, to say *something*, anything, to diffuse the situation, to tell Sasuke that Itachi wasn't the man he thought he was. And found that she was physically incapable of movement.

She tried moving her fingers, her toes, wiggling her eyebrows.

Nothing.

Itachi rose, leaving her paralyzed behind him. She'd almost convinced him, and now, at the eleventh hour, he was going back to his earlier plan. She would have ground her teeth if she could just fucking *move*, damn it.

"Foolish little brother," he said coolly, in that awful emotionless voice she hated so much. "Your timing leaves much to be desired."

"Why, did you want to snuggle with your new toy a little more?" Sasuke snarled. "She loves *me*. She'd never cozy up to you in that way. For whatever your twisted genjutsu did to her mind, you will pay, Itachi!"

Sakura would have rolled her eyes if she'd been capable of it, but it appeared that whatever jutsu Itachi had cast prevented that too.

She stopped short, realizing. Paralysis jutsus almost never affected the movement of the eyes. Heart pounding, she began to examine every nerve and muscle, looking for the source. If she couldn't move her eyes while she retained her consciousness, it might indicate a

technique that was placed on a single muscle or nerve and spread until it locked down every possible movement. Something more advanced than the typical technique, which only bound the limbs.

“You think you can seek me out for your own selfish reasons and call yourself a hero, don’t you?” Itachi asked. “Very well, little brother. I will play the villain for your melodrama.”

Sakura had to admit that was a little unfair on Itachi’s part when he’d been the one to start the whole act in the first place. Her veins turned to ice as she realized that he was provoking Sasuke on purpose. There could only be one reason for it – he wanted to ensure that Sasuke would finish the job.

She desperately wished she could move her eyes if only so she could watch what was going on, but her gaze was fixed on the ground. She forced herself to continue working at a steady pace to visualize her nerves with chakra. She would gain nothing from rushing, and she could not allow her emotional state to affect her judgement or her pace.

Kakashi stopped when a figure in Akatsuki’s black robes and an orange mask appeared in front of them, blocking their path. He ground his teeth. According to the directions Katsuyu-sama had given them that morning, Sakura was just a couple of kilometres ahead. They were *so close*. If he strained his senses, Kakashi almost thought he could sense the resonance of chakra being used in battle.

He kept his eyes fixed on the figure as he observed Naruto and Tenzō pausing in a combat-ready stance just a little ways behind him and to either side.

He sensed Shizune’s chakra fall back and take position in the branches of a nearby tree, ready to provide support and healing as necessary, though Kakashi had given her strict instructions to use her chakra sparingly. He still could not quite bring himself to believe that Itachi would truly prioritize Sakura’s safety, and he would have Shizune ready to give Sakura whatever she needed.

He waited, shoulders tense. Sakura’s intel had told them that the man preferred to go by Tobi. A part of Kakashi still desperately hoped that it was all a lie, that Obito hadn’t betrayed his home and everything he’d stood for. That maybe Tobi was an illegitimate offspring of some Uchiha, even as he knew he was grasping at straws.

He jerked his head. Taking his cue, Naruto lunged toward Tobi while wood erupted from the floor, limiting the man's movements. They didn't need to trap him. Sakura's intel had confirmed that the masked man's Mangekyō conferred the ability to pass through things – it was Kamui for certain. The same ability Kakashi possessed. If it truly was Obito, both eyes should lead them to the same dimension.

If they timed it right, they could force him to use Kamui, and they would know for certain if Obito had become the scum he had spent his youth railing against.

Itachi watched Sasuke, Sharingan observing every twitch of his muscles. He would wait for Sasuke to make the first move.

His brother truly had the worst possible timing. He'd just been about to promise his commitment to Sakura. It almost seemed like fate to Itachi that Sasuke would arrive just in time to prevent him from making that vow, the universe conspiring to ensure that he was duly punished for his sins. That at the very moment he tried to choose his own happiness, it was snatched from him.

That he hadn't yet spoken the words didn't matter. In his heart, he'd already chosen. Turning his back on ten years of plans wasn't a decision he'd made lightly, and it was one he would stick to. But Sakura didn't know that, and Itachi worried that she might, in a bid to sway him, say something that might make Sasuke target her instead. That was not a risk he was willing to take.

He could not win here in a fair fight. He was too low on chakra, and Sasuke would know it. There was no hiding that from his Sharingan. And trying to tell him the truth in this situation would not work – Sasuke would believe it a lie. Itachi would simply have to provoke him and knock him out. After that, he'd release the paralysis jutsu he'd placed on Sakura, and they'd deal with the team Sasuke had gathered, waiting a little further back.

He could only hope that Sasuke would actually be willing to listen to him, after all he'd done. He resisted the urge to swallow. The villain in Sasuke's mind would not show any signs of nerves. Even the slightest hesitation on his part would convince Sasuke that Itachi was weak, and it would only spur him to attack all the more ferociously.

He *could* use a Tsukuyomi, he supposed. But Itachi very quickly decided against it. It required too much chakra to use. And Tsukuyomi hadn't been capable of knocking Sasuke out even when he'd been a

child who hadn't activated his Sharingan.

No. Itachi would have to distract his younger brother the old-fashioned way, and hold his chakra in reserve in case he needed a last-ditch move to protect his love.

The moment Naruto's Rasengan connected with masked nin's body, Kakashi transported himself into the Kamui dimension.

The little hope he'd managed to retain evaporated. He'd only caught a glimpse of the masked nin transporting in and out of the dimension, but that was enough. Possession of a Mangekyō Sharingan was already rare enough in the days before the Uchiha massacre. For someone to possess one with the same ability as Obito's, and to connect to the exact same shadow dimension as his?

It was Obito alright.

He stood still, waiting. Tenzō and Naruto had worked out the various attack formations they could use against Obito. It was only a matter of time before he reappeared in the dimension. And then, Kakashi could knock some sense into him.

Kakashi was in the Kamui dimension.

Obito sucked in a breath. There was no reason for Kakashi to leave the battlefield, even against an enemy who seemed as ridiculous as Tobi.

Not unless he *knew*.

Somehow, he'd been found out. He had no idea how, but that didn't matter. Keeping up the Tobi persona would not help him now.

He'd have to use a different tactic to deal with Kakashi.

She couldn't find a single trace of any jutsu working on her muscles or her nerves. But Inner Sakura couldn't find any indication of a genjutsu either.

Shit. The jutsu must have targeted her brain. It was the worst possible outcome, and *of course* it was the one she was stuck with. The brain was far too complicated, and even though she'd gotten more confident in her ability to stimulate neural regions without instantly frying the entire brain, it was still far too risky for her to root around without

knowing what she was doing.

She wanted to scream, to cry, *anything*, but all she could do was sit there, still as a corpse, staring at the layer of mulch that covered the forest floor, even as she heard the clash of metal against metal.

Trying to quiet her mind, she focused on the feeling of her chakra circulating. *Come on*, she told herself. She was known as one of the greatest medics in the world, second only to shishou herself. Her knowledge of the human body was as precise as it could get. If even Deidara could find a way to break free of her neural stimulation-induced genjutsu, then surely she could –

That was it.

Deidara hadn't used any special technique to dispel hers. He'd just used a simple genjutsu kai. Hoping against hope that her idea would work, Sakura stopped and restarted the flow of her chakra as she would to forcibly end any genjutsu.

She almost couldn't bring herself to test out a movement and see if it had worked. What if it hadn't? The regions controlling movement were separate from the ones influencing perception and emotion, and –

She administered a mental smack to herself to stop spiralling already, and tried wiggling her fingers.

She'd done it. She'd broken one of Itachi's techniques from the inside.

Grinning widely, she leapt to her feet, and took in the situation. It was time for her to put an end to Sasuke's delusions that she still loved him, and to save Itachi from himself.

Kakashi's fist slammed into Obito's chest, electricity crackling. His blood sprayed from the wound, warm and wet, and Kakashi almost lost himself.

Not again not again not again –

"Kai!" he shouted, dispelling the illusion.

He glared at the masked nin. "There's really no need for such tricks, Obito!"

"Isn't there?" Obito hissed. "I saw it in your face, Kakashi. You know,

and you judge me for it. You don't even know what I'm trying to do, and you think you're so much better than me!"

"I don't think I'm better than you," Kakashi said. Losing his temper would not serve him now. He had one chance to stop this madness, to make Obito *see*. "I just think you've become worse than me. You've become the very scum you called me, Obito!"

"I'm not the one that killed my teammate!" Obito roared. He was all fury, throwing his fists at Kakashi with little regard for subtlety or technique.

"So that's it, then, Obito?" Kakashi demanded, dodging his blows with ease. Obito's anger was making him careless, and he was falling into his old combat patterns. "Rin died at my hands, so you turn your back on your entire village? The world? You decide that running an international terrorist group and extracting bijuu is the way to go?"

"You don't know what I'm trying to do," Obito repeated, his voice acid. "I haven't turned my back on *anyone*, Kakashi. Everything I've done, I've done it for Rin."

Kakashi allowed his fists to answer for him. He'd seen the shadow of his teammates in his genin. Obito could hardly have missed how Sakura resembled Rin – her love for her precious people, her determination to save others, her resilience and tenacity in improving herself. He took her hostage and used her as *bait* and Obito dared say he was doing this for Rin?

Kakashi was no Naruto, to be able to connect with the hearts and minds of others. He could barely speak like a functioning human being most days. He thought again of all the hours he'd spent standing in front of the cenotaph, thinking of Obito, then Obito and Rin, then his entire team. Wishing they could have lived. Wishing that death didn't follow him like an old friend.

And now, to know that Obito was alive, and labouring under such delusions?

He owed it to his friend, the Obito he'd known, to put down this – this *thing* that wore his face.

Obito cursed mentally, leaving the Kamui dimension. He'd hoped his words would spark Kakashi's curiosity, distract him and make him drop his guard. He'd miscalculated yet again, as he had when he'd

thought the orders Itachi had been given would have turned him against Konoha. And now, he'd only succeeded in riling Kakashi up.

As he found himself back in the clearing, he realized that the jinchuriki and the Mokuton user hadn't waited around for him. They'd taken advantage of his distraction with Kakashi, and they'd gone ahead. The additional chakra presence that had been with them had left as well.

He quickened his pace, pursuing them. They *could not* be allowed to interfere with Itachi's and Sasuke's battle. It had been an exercise in precision to maneuver all the pieces exactly where he wanted them, to ensure that the brothers would cross paths. Itachi needed to die, and Sasuke needed to be vulnerable. Now more than ever, since Nagato had foolishly thrown away the remaining soldiers they had.

He thought of Rin, of seeing her kind smile again, and felt his steps quicken. It was all for her, and he'd destroy the entire world before he lost the chance to be with her again.

Itachi felt his palms grow slick with sweat with each elemental technique he was forced to use. They depleted his supply of chakra faster than he could afford, and he was no closer to finding an opening that he could use to knock Sasuke out. But simply dodging was not enough to help him against his brother.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of pink, and felt cold dread seep through his chest. No. That paralysis technique was one he'd copied from Satori. He'd used it knowing that Sakura's resistance to genjutsu and her knowledge of medicine would enable her to easily undo any other technique he used.

He threw aside all caution, and lunged at Sasuke. He had to stop him before Sakura did anything to jeopardize herself.

"Itachi, please! Don't do this. Don't leave me to raise our child alone!"

Sasuke's eyes narrowed, and he mouthed the words Sakura had spoken. Itachi could almost see the comprehension dawning on him as he processed it, his nostrils flaring. A child. Sakura's child, and Itachi's.

"You took my entire family from me, and now you dare to start your own?" he snarled. Electricity crackled in his fists as he too closed the distance between him and Itachi. Itachi could only feel relief – Sasuke

blamed *him*, and wasn't lashing out at Sakura.

A second figure burst through the trees, trailing lightning. Terror stabbed Itachi's heart. *No*. His fear and panic had made him careless. He'd taken the chakra signatures he'd noticed at face value, hadn't checked for additional presences, hadn't even considered the possibility that Sasuke might have a clone in reserve.

The Sharingan couldn't help him now. He'd already committed to his trajectory. Even as he tried to turn his body in mid-air, to redirect his path to protect Sakura, he was too slow. He could only watch as the Chidori slammed into Sakura's abdomen, as the blood sprayed all around Sasuke's fist.

Too late, far too late, the Susano'o he'd thrown up materialized around him as he caught Sakura's falling body in his arms; Sasuke's clone dissipating. He looked into her glassy eyes and her pale face, and felt his entire world slip away from him.

No, no, no!

He recalled everything Sakura had taught him about healing. It didn't matter that it would take too much time for him to go hunting for the healing seals in her pack. It didn't matter that he could barely see through the tears that clouded his vision. Under her tutelage, he'd drawn those seals over and over, and he could draw them in his sleep at this point.

When the moment was over, when he had time, he would thank the deities that had made him walk in on her performing that experiment all those weeks ago, that had led him to ask about the theory behind it, that had made him question her on how she would use her discoveries on the chakra in blood.

He dipped his finger in the blood that gushed from her body, and drew the seal over her with practiced movements. As a green glow covered her abdomen, beginning to close the wound, he cradled her face in his hands.

"Stay with me, Sakura," he begged, his gut twisting with dread. He couldn't even bring himself to care about where his little brother was or what he was doing. As long as there was chakra in his body, Susano'o would protect them without too much conscious effort on Itachi's part. He could only look at Sakura, babbling pleas for her to stay with him, putting all his faith in her fighting spirit.

Obito exhaled when Zetsu materialized. *Finally*. It was supposed to have been an easy battle – taunting Kakashi and his squad, watching them flounder as they tried to figure out how he was evading their blows. Instead, he'd been the one struggling, unable to use his signature methods of defense. Anytime he tried to avoid a blow from the jinchuriki or from the Mokuton user by darting into the Kamui dimension, Kakashi had been waiting to administer another blow.

This fight was running him ragged, and it *showed*. His breaths came in shallow pants, and his movements were becoming sluggish.

“Well?” he demanded.

“The fight’s stopped,” Zetsu informed him. “Sasuke injured the Haruno girl. Itachi abandoned the battle to tend to her.”

Obito clenched his teeth. It had seemed such a good idea at the time to use the girl and Sasuke as bait to lure out the jinchuriki. But now, even though the jinchuriki was right in front of him, Obito couldn't possibly grab him without risking injury to himself. And the girl's mere presence had changed Itachi, unravelling years of planning and maneuvering.

It was time to cut his losses.

Obito flashed in and out of the Kamui dimension with an urgency that he hadn't displayed earlier. Judging by the set of his jaw and the way his shoulders were pushed back, Kakashi deduced that he was done with the fight. He transported himself back to the regular dimension, and began following the trail that Tenzō, Naruto, and Shizune had left.

He caught up to them just as they were gaining on the site where he'd sensed all that chakra being wielded earlier. It was Sasuke's, Kakashi realized, a sour taste in his mouth. He remembered well what Sasuke had done to Sakura the last time they'd encountered each other, and he remembered how long it had taken the sparkle to return to Sakura's eyes.

But when they finally entered the clearing, Sasuke was nowhere to be seen. Obito was also gone. There was only Uchiha Itachi, cradling an unconscious Sakura in his arms. His eyes were fixed entirely on Sakura's prone form, his shoulders shaking. The only indication he gave that he'd even noticed their arrival was the rapid dissipation of the orange shield that surrounded them.

Shizune immediately rushed toward Sakura. At her approach, Itachi's arms tightened around Sakura, angling her so that he placed himself between Shizune and Sakura.

"Uchiha-san, I'm a medic. I can help her," Shizune said softly. A moment passed, and another, and finally Itachi released Sakura, and allowed Shizune to begin examining her. He still kept a hand curled around hers, as if worried that she would disappear if he let her go for even a second.

"I – I don't understand," Naruto said, his voice shaking. Kakashi realized belatedly that he'd been silent for the past minutes, his body frozen. "You killed all of them. You – you tortured Sasuke. And now, you – Sakura-chan? How?"

Kakashi could see the effort it was taking Naruto to hold himself back. He needed to prevent this situation from escalating any more than necessary. Sakura was their priority.

"There are things you don't know, Naruto," he said quietly. Itachi gave every appearance of ignoring them, eyes focused on Sakura, but he knew that his kouhai would be listening to every word that was spoken. "What's important is that we get Sakura home, where she can get the best possible care that Hokage-sama can give her."

Naruto drew in a steady breath, and nodded. As he began preparing to perform the Hiraishin, which would transport them back to Konoha's gates, Kakashi approached Itachi. He covered Obito's Sharingan, and held his hands out, palms facing upward, to show that he meant no harm.

"Itachi," he murmured, pitching his voice as low as it would go. It would not do for Naruto to overhear this. "If you leave now, I will not stop you. I will report that you fled, and that I did not attempt pursuit in the interest of ensuring Sakura's safe return." Tsunade-sama would be furious with him, he knew. But Itachi had never before allowed anyone to see even a hint of emotion on his face. That he'd been so affected by Sakura's state that he hadn't even bothered to control himself was highly telling.

That, in conjunction with everything Tsunade-sama had told him, cinched it for him. Itachi was no enemy to Konoha. They owed Sakura's safety to him, and Naruto's as well, given that it had been he who had first alerted Konoha that Akatsuki was hunting the bijuu.

If allowing him to leave would even begin to repay their debt to him,

Kakashi was more than happy to face the consequences of it.

Itachi shook his head. He looked up and finally met Kakashi's gaze, resolve in his red-rimmed eyes. "I swore that only death would take me from her side. I will not leave her now. I will take whatever consequences Konoha deems necessary, if it means she will know that I have done my best to keep my word to her."

Kakashi nodded. He'd done his best. Now, only time would tell what would happen next.

Chapter End Notes

I have been waiting MONTHS to share this chapter. It's one of the first scenes I had in my mind, and I've been building towards it all along! I can't even count the number of times I've had Sakura collapsing and Itachi cradling her body looping over and over in my mind.

But the problem is that this was the apex of my planning, and I'm still not entirely decided on where the story's going next □ so I've decided to put this story on hiatus while I continue working on my other story!

And I think Prisoner of Fate should begin updating again sometime in November, so see you guys then hehehe. Thanks for being an amazing bunch of readers honestly, your comments give me life and give me the motivation to keep going!

Don't Let The Light Go Out

Chapter Notes

We're back!

This chapter was heavily inspired by 'Don't Let The Light Go Out' by Panic! At the Disco. I was listening to it on loop while writing - the lyrics are especially perfect for what Itachi's feeling in this chapter, and I will freely admit to stealing some of the lyrics and incorporating them 🤪

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took everything in Itachi to let go of Sakura's limp hand. He desperately wanted to stay with her, continue to feel each beat of her heart, to know that she was still there in the world. To hold the hands that had brought him back from the brink of death, which had stroked and caressed him, *loved him*.

But the very instant after Uzumaki-san had transported them into the Konoha Hospital's lobby, he felt ANBU materialize behind them, and he knew his time was up. For him to continue to cling to Sakura would be interpreted as resisting arrest, and would ultimately delay his return to her.

He looked at the brunette still working over Sakura with intense focus. Shizune, one of the others had called her. Sakura had shared much about her sibling disciple and her dedication to her loved ones and patients.

He had never trusted another since the day that Shisui had thrown himself into the Naka River. But somehow, Sakura had taught him to believe in her. And now, he would place his faith in the capable hands of someone Sakura herself trusted.

He gave her hand one final squeeze, and turned to face the ANBU, his hands in front of him, palms facing away from each other. One of the most awkward positions from which to weave signs, and a clear sign of surrender.

Time seemed to flow impossibly slowly from the instant he released Sakura's hand. It felt like he was moving through molasses as he was brought to T&I, chakra-suppressing handcuffs on his wrists. And once he was secured in a darkened room, awaiting interrogation, he lost all

sense of its passage.

Alone with his thoughts, his mind drifted. It felt so surreal. The time since his and Sakura's conversation in the clearing, where she'd convinced him to turn his back on years of plans, would be better measured in the scale of minutes rather than hours or days.

In those few seconds between when he'd made his decision and when Sasuke had arrived, he'd allowed himself to dream. Of a black-haired daughter with jade eyes, with Sakura's radiant smile and her adorable way of scrunching her nose. Of showing their child the world from atop his shoulders, of stolen kisses with Sakura when their daughter wasn't looking.

Now, he only prayed that Sakura had not perished together with the child. It would have been such a tiny thing – a barely implanted foetus, a ball of cells that would not even be visible to the human eye. There was no possibility that it would have survived Sasuke's attack. But there was still hope for Sakura. He pushed aside the memory of her bloodless skin, her dull eyes. She was strong and spirited. She would fight to live. She could. She would.

My fault. My fault. My fault. The words reverberated over and over, pounding the inside of his skull. If only he'd decided sooner. If only he'd found a way to reassure Sakura of his decision – he knew that she'd said what she had on purpose, to distract Sasuke from attacking him.

If only he hadn't shaped Sasuke into a killer who would attack an unborn child in his quest for vengeance.

He'd done this. He'd told his brother his hate was insufficient. His brother had obeyed, and was now so full of hate that he'd sought to kill a woman he thought was still in love with him, kill an *unborn child*, all to make Itachi suffer.

And oh, how he'd succeeded. *You took my entire family from me*, he'd said to Itachi. But they'd been Itachi's family too. And now, the second one he'd thought he could build for himself too was ripped from him.

Itachi's head dropped into his palms. He could not bring himself to care about keeping up appearances any longer. How could he care about his cover when his child was dead? What did the perception of others matter when the woman he loved more than anything in the world was fighting for her life?

He shuddered as his mind again returned to the image of Sakura's broken body. To think that she might never laugh again, that she might never again argue with him until he grew weary and she won through sheer stubbornness, was the greatest nightmare anyone could have devised for him.

She'd been right. Of course she'd been right. *You can't manipulate him into deciding that he's going to live a happy life*, she'd said. In his arrogance, he'd thought he had the right to set Sasuke's path. He'd thought he knew best.

He'd been wrong, and this torment was everything he deserved and more.

But he only wished Sakura and their child hadn't had to pay the price as well.

He could no longer stop the tears that rolled down his cheeks, the sobs that wracked his body. He no longer wanted to.

His way, of deceit and manipulation and mistrust, had brought nothing but grief. He was done.

When Yamanaka Inoichi eventually came in with an entire support squad to begin his interrogation, Itachi didn't hold anything back. He'd already dismantled all the traps and walls that had been carefully arranged in his mind the moment he'd noticed Kakashi's presence in that clearing.

There was no more point to keeping his secrets. It had all been for Sasuke, anyway. So the village would view Sasuke as the hero who put down the traitor, so Sasuke would be at peace. Both outcomes were now rendered impossible – Sasuke's defection had named him traitor as well. And as for the second, Obito already had Sasuke, and Itachi had no doubt his secrets would be revealed to his little brother in the worst possible light.

As little as a day ago, Itachi might have believed himself to be the only one capable of rescuing Sasuke from Obito's manipulative clutches. But after feeling his own impotence – unable to do anything but sit by Sakura and pray the seal worked, too low on chakra to even consider dismissing Susano'o and taking Obito on as he'd grabbed Sasuke – he could no longer think the same way.

Perhaps someone else would be more capable of setting things right.

And so, he allowed Yamanaka Inoichi unhindered access to his mind. He allowed him to walk through all his experiences – even his greatest shames, even the private moments he'd had with Sakura. To hide anything would have aroused the man's suspicions, and would delay his return to Sakura.

Finally, it was over, and Itachi was alone in his mind again. Yamanaka-san exhaled, the relaxed posture of his body betrayed only by the way his eyes shut firmly for an instant, as if trying to deny everything Itachi had shown him.

He dismissed his squad, and turned back to Itachi.

“The scroll Saindaime-sama gave you. Where is it?”

With slow movements, Itachi drew the sealing scroll where he kept most of his possessions from his pocket, and handed it over.

“The unlocking sequence is monkey, boar, ram, dragon, boar, bird, ram, ox, ram, dragon, tiger,” Itachi informed. Yamanaka-san may have been convinced that Itachi was not a threat, but he would await orders from the Hokage before releasing his chakra-suppressing handcuffs.

Having unlocked the scroll, Yamanaka-san quickly identified the mission scroll in question, bearing the Third Hokage's own seal. Unquestionable proof that Itachi had been acting on Konoha's orders when he'd slaughtered his clan and defected.

Watching him walk out of the interrogation room, Itachi could only hope that they would soon deign to tell him if Sakura was alright.

Relief and terror warred in Itachi's heart when the Hokage walked in. Given her relationship with Sakura, if she was here, it must mean Sakura was out of the woods.

Or it could mean that Sakura was dead.

“Sakura – how is she – ” he gasped, losing the last dregs of his self-control. He'd held on previously, knowing that to ask for any news would only cause delays – if only by a few seconds – to getting back to her. But at this point, he knew he'd given them all the information he had, cooperated as much as he could. He couldn't hold back from asking anymore.

The Hokage sighed. "We'll get to that," she said, and Itachi felt his mouth turn dry. Surely, if Sakura was alright, she would have just said so?

She sat opposite him, and for just an instant, the genjutsu she kept running almost constantly dropped, and he could see for himself how haggard she looked. "Konoha owes you a great debt. One we can never repay," she said, interlacing her fingers. "First, for averting the coup, at a great personal cost to yourself. Second, for giving us the early warning we needed to safeguard not just our own village's jinchuuriki, but the jinchuuriki of all the Five Great Shinobi Nations. Third, for returning Sakura to us."

"Then Sakura – "

"Is alive, yes." Itachi felt the tension around his heart ease just a little. He wondered if his terrors were what caused him to hear the unspoken *for now* hanging in the air.

"I will bring you to see her soon. But before that, we must settle the matter of your reintegration. I assume your return and your cooperation with the interrogation means you intend to stay?"

"Yes," he answered. He had questions, but he would hold them. The sooner they got through this conversation, the sooner he could be reunited with his beloved.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Covering up the reason behind the massacre was a terrible idea," she muttered. "Even though you *were* acting on orders, to release that truth now would do little good. It would only make the clans uneasy that their annihilation would be ordered if they stepped out of line. And the only evidence that the Uchiha were even planning a coup comes from you. Even though Inoichi's competence is unquestionable, your abilities with genjutsu and deception mean that there would still be a certain level of suspicion."

He nodded, wishing she would just get to the point.

"Here is the story that will be released. Uchiha Obito was the true perpetrator of the massacre. You were away on a mission on that night, and you were framed. Sasuke was just a child at a time – his testimony can be explained away by his being fooled by genjutsu. When you returned, you found yourself framed for the massacre. You were ordered to accept the blame so that you could infiltrate the Akatsuki, and relay information to the village."

Itachi had sworn he would accept whatever she said, if only to hasten the process. But this...

“It would seem oddly convenient that I just so happened to be framed. Especially when there were documented encounters of me clearly acting in an antagonistic fashion towards Konoha shinobi.”

The Hokage simply shrugged. “The more seasoned shinobi might question, yes, as might those who are the more suspicious sorts. But Sakura has ensured I understood that you had your reasons for wanting to keep the planned coup a secret. And honouring your wishes is really the least the village could do after everything you’ve been through.”

She rose, and smirked. “So, are you going to come with me, or do you just want to sit here and argue all day?”

He was glad that he’d left his Akatsuki cloak behind in the clearing, not even bothering to bring it with him. As it was, he attracted far too many stares as he followed the Hokage through the streets of Konoha, making their way to the hospital. As uncomfortable as it made him to be out in the open, he tolerated it, rather than requesting to take to the rooftops. He understood her reasoning, after all – seeing him walk amicably with the Hokage would go a long way toward dispelling the inevitable speculation that his return to Konoha was for the reason of killing everyone in their beds.

As they walked, the Hokage told him that Sakura was healed of her injuries, and that she’d actually been awake and conscious for a short while. She just needed rest to recover her chakra and to replenish the blood she’d lost. The Hokage did not mention their child, and Itachi dared not ask. Surely, if anything had happened to the child, she would have said so? Yet, if their child was well, surely she could have said so as she was reassuring him of Sakura’s wellbeing? He did not think a medic of Tsunade’s calibre would have missed the pregnancy when even he, with the basic training Sakura had given him, had been able to detect it.

Thankfully, nobody stopped them on their way through the hospital and into Sakura’s room. There was a middle-aged blonde woman sitting at her bedside, holding her hand. Sakura’s eyes were closed, and Itachi was relieved to see her chest rising and falling at a regular pace. There was also a small black cat on her stomach, nuzzling into her. He felt his eyebrows rise. He hadn’t known she had a pet.

The woman turned to look at the Hokage and at him, and levelled a furious glare at them both. "Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my daughter's room?" she demanded to Itachi. The cat leapt off the bed, and went to rub itself against her legs, as if trying to soothe her temper.

"Haruno-san," Tsunade began in a polite tone, but the woman cut her off.

"I wasn't asking you," she hissed. "*Hokage-sama*," she added, almost as an afterthought, the words dripping with venom.

As the two women engaged in their stand-off, Itachi snuck his way to Sakura's bedside and sat on an empty stool. It felt absolutely ridiculous that after everything they'd been through together, they were separated by an overprotective mother, of all things.

It served as a reminder to him, however. They had become so close so quickly during Sakura's captivity because they had only had each other. Knowing his lover and her personality, though, he would not be surprised if she was an extremely popular girl. A sudden thought chilled him. What if she no longer wanted to be with him? What if she'd tired of all the baggage he carried, and decided that she could be with someone else, someone who could give her a simpler, happier, life?

His fingers interlaced with hers, and even though she was unconscious, the warmth of her hand in his gave him strength. *No*. He knew Sakura. He knew the intensity and ferocity with which she loved. The change in their surroundings would not change her feelings for him.

Sakura's mother noticed him again. "Get away from my daughter!" she screamed.

Itachi kept his eyes on Sakura. "I will not," he said, keeping his tone even through sheer willpower.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she spat, ignoring the Hokage's attempts to get her attention. Itachi found himself wondering how the Hokage could allow such disrespect towards herself.

"Her lover," he replied coolly, giving her a look that would have made even Hidan think twice about engaging. Sakura's mother, a civilian judging by her minimal chakra levels, was not cowed one bit. It appeared that the temper and the fearlessness were both inherited

traits.

He loved both of those things about Sakura, he reminded himself. He could tolerate those traits in her mother. He could.

“Wha – the nerve! Her lo – ”

“Sakura owes her life to Itachi, Haruno-san. He protected her at great risk to himself.”

“Then why the hell is he in such good condition, when *my daughter* spent the past six hours in surgery? Tell me that! I’ve been worried *sick* about her for the past month, not knowing if I was ever going to see her again, and this *boy* just thinks he can waltz in and take advantage of her while she isn’t awake?”

Itachi ignored them both. Sakura’s eyelids were fluttering. She was waking up.

Her eyes finally opened, and Itachi found his grip on her hand tightening as he looked into the eyes he so loved. “Sakura,” he said, feeling like he could finally breathe again. The Hokage had told him she was alright, but it simply wasn’t the same as seeing it, feeling it, for himself.

Her gaze was unfocused before her attention zeroed in on him, and he felt her gripping his hand back with equal fervour. “Itachi,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. “You’re here.”

He lowered his head to their joined hands, and kissed her palm. He kept his gaze focused downwards, unable to stop the tears that welled up in his eyes. She was alive, she was awake, she was alright. And she didn’t appear to despise him.

“Of course I am,” he replied, keeping his voice low. He could feel two sets of eyes watching his interaction with Sakura. It was the reality of their situation, he knew – they didn’t just belong to each other any longer. Sakura especially had other connections – family, friends, and they would all want to spend time with her, radiant and warm as she was.

But he still felt that this moment should be just for the two of them.

“I swore to you that only death would take me from your side.”

“And it almost did,” she said.

Itachi glanced up, and saw Sakura's mother regarding him with what looked like curiosity. It appeared that her daughter's warm greeting to him had soothed some of her anger, watered it down to a mild suspicion instead.

Sakura followed his gaze, and gasped. "Kaa-chan! Shishou," she greeted then both. Her gaze drifted to the cat at her mother's legs. "Karasu!" she exclaimed, and the cat purred. Itachi suppressed the smile he felt tugging at the corners of his lips. Her naming sense was truly something special. First, she'd named one of his crows *Akuma*, of all things, and now, he found out that she called her cat Crow.

Sakura's mother pushed forward to speak with her daughter, wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

"Oh, Sakura-chan," she sighed, her tears falling freely. "I thought I'd lost you forever. And even when *Hokage-sama* told me you were alive and able to communicate – I was still so terrified for you. I'm so sorry, baby. I let myself go after Kizashi's death, and you felt like you had to take all those missions to support me. You'd never have been captured –"

Sakura shook her head. "No, Kaa-chan. I wasn't captured by accident. They specifically wanted me."

Her mother shot a suspicious glance at him, and dipped her head closer to Sakura and began whispering. Clearly, either Sakura had never bothered to tell her mother about the sensitive ears of shinobi, or she had and her mother hadn't believed her.

"Was it *him*? He said he's your lover – Sakura, is he pressuring you? Did he kidnap you to get his hands on you? Just tell me baby, and ninja or no, I'll take care of him."

Sakura laughed, a beautiful, tinkling sound that warmed Itachi from the inside. Her fond gaze turned back towards him, and he no longer hold back the smile that spread across his face in answer. He revised his earlier thought. If after all they'd been through, their greatest problem was an overprotective mother's approval, then life would be wonderful indeed.

"No, Kaa-chan," she said in a normal tone. "Itachi – he protected me from everything. Because of him, I was never even hurt."

Itachi saw the moment Sakura's mother's eyes shifted – from a merely suspicious gaze to widening in horror, before settling into a look of

absolute terror. The Hokage had addressed him by name earlier, but she probably hadn't registered it, worried as she'd been over Sakura's welfare. But now, she took him in – his distinctively Uchiha looks, his name, the fact that he'd been present among a group of criminals who'd abducted her daughter.

"Itachi," she breathed, eyes wide and voice trembling. "Sakura, isn't that the – the – mad Uchiha?"

So that's what they were calling him in Konoha. The civilians, at least. He supposed it was a kinder moniker than some he could have come up with. Sakura's fingers, though, tightened around his. "Kaa-chan, please don't ever call Itachi that again. The story we tell in Konoha isn't true, he's not really like that – "

The Hokage cut in then, probably having decided not to risk Sakura giving her mother a story different from the one she'd already decided to circulate.

"Haruno-san, if you'll permit me to explain outside? Let me assure you, Itachi has been entirely cleared by our investigation. He poses no threat."

Sakura nodded encouragingly at her mother, who reluctantly followed the Hokage out. The moment the door closed behind them, Itachi buried his face against Sakura's chest, inhaling deeply. He carefully wrapped his arms around her waist, not wanting to disrupt the various tubes she was connected to. She embraced him tightly, with surprising strength considering her condition.

Her body began trembling, and it wasn't long before she was sobbing. "I'm sorry, Itachi," she managed to get out, before her cries overtook her. He looked up at her red-rimmed eyes, and smoothed his hand over her hair.

"I should be the one apologizing to you, Sakura," he said softly. "I failed you over and over."

She shook her head vehemently. "No, that's not what I – " She paused, hiccoughing. "Itachi, please, just let me get this out."

He nodded, waiting. Her mouth opened and closed a few times as she struggled to find the words. He thought he knew what she was getting at.

"Sakura, I know you said those words on purpose. You were trying to

provoke Sasuke, distract him from me. I do not blame you for it at all.”

“You should!” she almost shrieked. “Itachi, because I did that, our baby’s *dead*. After everything I said to you – everything I accused you of – I threw our baby’s life away.”

His arms fell limply to his side. He’d known, he’d expected, he’d told himself it was a certainty. Yet at that moment, Itachi realized that he’d held onto a hope that somehow, Sakura would surprise him again. That she’d somehow have managed to protect their child.

He witnessed the death of his dreams once again, but this time, with the knowledge that there would be no eleventh-hour miracle. Their child was gone, and it was all *his fault*.

“I thought I could protect it. I thought that shielding my womb with chakra would have been enough.”

He felt her release him, and scoot backwards on the bed, leaving his loose embrace. He allowed it, even as his body cried out in protest at the loss of the one thing in the world that still had the capacity to bring him solace.

He did not deserve comfort.

“I – I understand. If you decide to – to leave,” she said in a voice so soft, small, it pierced through the haze of his sorrow to break his heart once more. His head shot up to regard her – was she *asking* him to leave in a roundabout way? No. That could not be right. Sakura had never played those sorts of games. She’d always been straightforward and direct.

She sniffled, and went on. “I know you only came back with us because – because you wanted to make sure I was okay. Well, I am. And you don’t have any reason to – to stay anymore.”

The weight in his chest only grew heavier. She truly believed he would leave her. He’d done this. Again, he found himself regretting the choices he’d made. He’d constantly chosen Sasuke, and his own selfish desires to escape his life, over her.

He realized then that she was still weeping, and that he had not said a word since she had told him about their child’s – fate. He could not bring himself to think of that other word. He was not the only one who felt the loss. She needed comfort too. She feared he would leave

her as well.

Perhaps it was not such a selfish action for him to seek closeness to her after all.

He pulled the stool closer to her bedside, and placed his arm around her shoulders. His other hand took hers, and interlaced their fingers again. Seeking comfort, and giving it at the same time.

"I love – loved – our child," he said softly. "But I love you too. That will not change because we have suffered a loss. I'm not going anywhere, Sakura."

She touched the planes of his face, gently moving it so she could examine his gaze. He swallowed as he realized she was looking for any sign of deception.

My fault.

She released him, and pinched the skin of her arm. She watched as the pale flesh turned red, and looked back up at him, wonder swimming in her eyes.

"Really?" she asked. "I – I thought you'd leave for sure. That's why before I passed out after the surgery, I asked shishou to let me be the one to tell you. So I could at least see you one last time." Her eyes dropped to their intertwined hands, and her hair fell forward to cover her face.

My fault. He had to show her that he was worthy of her trust.

"I decided to stay. Even before Sasuke came," he said, tilting her chin upwards and tucking her hair behind her ear. He drew his arm back around her shoulders, and she finally leaned into his embrace, the tension leaving her body. He turned his face, nuzzling into her hair. Her usual herbal scent was covered by the hospital's antiseptic smell, but the knowledge that he was with his beloved managed to soothe the storm of fears that raged within him. "It was you, Sakura. Your words, and your dreams for our future. Your love. You showed me that a different way was possible."

"I should have realized," she said, her voice becoming choked once more. "I should have trusted you. If I had, none of this would have happened. We'd still have our baby. I thought we'd have a boy with your hair and eyes."

“You had no way of knowing,” he replied. “I gave you no reason to think those words would have succeeded, when all the previous ones did not.” He paused, and went on. “In any case, I think it would have been a girl. She would have had your eyes. I thought we could name her Hanako. For you.”

Flower’s child. The more their children resembled Sakura, the fewer ties they had to him, the better.

She snorted lightly, and he could almost believe her mirth to be genuine. “That would never happen. The gene for black eyes are dominant over green, and both your parents had black eyes, didn’t they?” He nodded, and she went on. “So there’s very little chance that you have anything *but* the genes for black eyes. Same goes for hair. Our children wouldn’t ever have my eye or hair colour, barring a miracle.”

“Where you are involved, I would never question the occurrence of a miracle,” he murmured. “You made me believe life could be worth living again. I would never have expected that to happen.”

She flushed lightly, and he was glad to see the pink in her cheeks. He never again wanted to see the ashen look she’d had after sustaining Sasuke’s attack.

Silence fell, and it was a comfortable one. They simply were with each other, and Itachi marvelled at the fact that the Hokage had managed to keep Sakura’s mother occupied for that long. Truly, the woman was amazing.

“Itachi?” Sakura asked, just as he began to think that she might have fallen asleep. “I know it’s probably silly, but can we make some kind of memorial for our baby?”

“Yes. We will,” he vowed. He should have thought of that himself. “They’re not alone, wherever they are. They never will be. My parents, and your father, will care for them. My cousin as well. And they’ll know that we’re always remembering them.”

She giggled, and Itachi felt lighter at the genuineness of her expression. “With my dad, he’ll become an unbearable prankster,” she said.

“With my cousin as well. And with your brains, and your heart, *she* would be able to wrap anyone’s heartstrings around her little finger.”

“I miss them.”

“I know. I do as well.”

“Do you think that they’ll know how much we love them?”

“As long as we continue to remember them, without a doubt. We barely knew of their existence for a day, but they have already changed our lives.”

She hummed and nodded, and they were quiet again for a while. Itachi felt the truth of his own words sink into his bones. Until he’d realized Sakura was pregnant, he had almost managed to convince himself that she would move on and find someone else after his death. It was her insistence on keeping their child that had made him realize the depth of the love she held for him, forced him to truly consider what the end he strove for would do to her.

“Did you really tell my mom that you’re my lover?” she asked after a while, breaking the silence.

“I did.”

She winced. “She’s going to have a few things to say to me later.”

“I would have liked to tell her that I am your husband.”

She yelped and sat up. “Itachi – is this – ”

“No,” he assured her. “There was so much I would have wanted to give to you, but could not due to our circumstances. This at least, I will do right. When I propose, it will be romantic, as I know you wish for.” A pause. “It helps, of course, that I already know what your answer will be.”

Her eyes sparkled, and Itachi mentally patted himself on the back for finally bringing her joy, for making her forget her grief, if only for a few minutes.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” she teased. “I have high expectations, and I will not say yes to a proposal that’s anything less than what I’ve dreamed of all my life.”

He could almost feel the laughter bubble up in response from his chest. It felt wrong, to be able to laugh and experience joy after the death of their child. Before it had even had a chance to live.

It was almost as if she'd read his mind. She kissed his cheek. "It's okay to be happy," she said. "After my dad died, I kept thinking that it was wrong for me to feel anything other than sadness. But then I watched my mom, saw how she became a shell of the woman she was. I don't think my dad would have liked that."

He nodded. Her words made sense, he supposed. He remembered the agonizing indecision he'd felt once he'd realized that she truly did love him. The thought that she might never again smile after his death had haunted him.

It was easier said than done, he knew. But for her sake, he would try.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all who have supported not only this story, but all my other works for ItaSaku week too! You guys are great, and I love y'all so much. (Shameless plug to go check them out if you haven't already - River of Sorrows in particular might appeal to those of you who enjoy the angst trains in PoF.)

Just a heads up yet again that I'm no longer holding myself to any kind of update schedule, especially since I'm going to be starting grad school in Jan, and I do need to start preparing. But rest assured again that this story is definitely getting finished. We're entering the final stretch now, and I *think* it's just going to be another 5-6 chapters to the end! I might be wrong though. After all, at one point, I did think this fic would be a max 20 chapters/80k word affair, but here we are *sighs*

The World Turned Upside Down

Chapter Notes

I told myself I wasn't going to post another chapter until I finished writing the entire story, but my will is weak, so you guys are getting this chapter haha. I managed to finish outlining the remaining parts, and it seems like I might actually be able to finish this whole story in 35 chapters! Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His eyes felt as if they'd been weighed down by lead, his brain as if it had been stuffed with cotton. Somewhere in the corner of Sasuke's mind, he realized that he'd been knocked out. It only made him fight harder to pull himself out of his helpless state.

As he did so, he was assaulted by a cacophony of words and images.

"Run and cling to life, pathetic little brother."

The frantic way in which Itachi had examined Sakura's prone body, pleading for her to be alright.

"You are not even worth killing."

Itachi's eyes, so wide that Sasuke could see the whites around the entire iris.

"I will play the villain for your melodrama."

"Foolish little brother, you must learn to look underneath the underneath."

Itachi's flushed face, his movements jerky rather than graceful as they always were. His eyes constantly flickering to the girl lying frozen on the ground.

"Hate me, resent me, and come find me when you have eyes like mine."

Itachi's expressions, written all over his face for Sasuke to see.

You must learn to look underneath the underneath.

Underneath the underneath.

Underneath...

Sasuke could have screamed. Would have, if his body wasn't resisting all his attempts to move.

He hadn't been able to think. Sakura had said those words – her child, and Itachi's, and he'd lost all sense. It had been entirely instinctive for him to direct the clone he'd kept in reserve towards Sakura. To uproot the weed, stop the spread of Itachi's poison, exterminate his line.

It hadn't even occurred to him until he'd seen Itachi sobbing over Sakura's unconscious form that to remove the child would have also killed the child's mother.

He'd been so sure that Itachi had kept Sakura under a genjutsu. There was no other explanation for how she, who as recently as a year ago had begged him to return to Konoha, would have snuggled up to the man he despised most in the world with that look of utter devotion.

And yet, he couldn't get that image of Itachi out of his mind. Itachi, who was normally so composed, weeping over Sakura.

Could they truly have cared for each other?

But why? Why would Sakura betray him that way? And how could Itachi – Itachi, who had heartlessly killed their entire family – how could he care about someone that much?

It made as little sense now as it had at the time.

Itachi's words came to him again – “I will play the villain for your melodrama.” Play. *Play*.

Underneath the underneath.

Question what motives people have.

Don't take their words for gospel truth.

After all, Itachi could very well have hidden himself that night if he'd wanted to. He hadn't. He'd *wanted* to show himself to Sasuke. And he only had Itachi's word for it that he'd done everything because he'd wanted to –

No. No, this was ridiculous. Was he really considering the possibility that Itachi could have had a deeper reason for killing everyone Sasuke held dear? For tormenting him afterwards? What reason could there be, other than pure, sadistic, cruelty? He'd shown himself because he

wanted to *loat*. He hadn't hidden himself because he'd been ready to leave the village anyway. Sasuke had been left alive because Itachi wanted his eyes.

But if that was the case, why was he still alive? He knew Itachi's abilities. He'd been low on chakra, but surely he could have at least made an attempt to fire off a lethal jutsu. He was certain that Itachi would have had some surprises up his sleeve. Even that aside, he knew how good Itachi was with kunai and shuriken. Yet, throughout their confrontation, he'd stayed entirely on the defensive. He'd taunted Sasuke, to be sure, but taking his words out of the equation, examining purely his actions, told an entirely different story.

Itachi hadn't been trying to kill Sasuke. He hadn't even been making a real effort to injure him.

But *why*? There was no reason to hold back. Sasuke had been openly flaunting his Mangekyō, showing that he had indeed come before Itachi with eyes like his.

At that moment, he sensed someone enter the space around him. A flare of chakra, and he could move. He sat up with a gasp. He must have been held down by a jutsu.

"Good, you're awake," the gruff voice said. Sasuke blinked rapidly, trying to acclimatize himself to the candlelight.

"Who are you?" he croaked.

The man stepped forward, and Sasuke could see that he wore an orange mask. He blinked, and he could see – a *Sharingan*. Almost involuntarily, he growled.

The stranger deactivated the eye then, and Sasuke relaxed by just a fraction. A true Uchiha, then. Not a pretender like his old sensei, who must have stolen the eye of an Uchiha. But if this stranger had managed to survive the massacre, he must have been a formidable threat even to Itachi's considerable abilities.

"I am Uchiha Madara," the stranger said. "And there are things you need to know."

"Liar," Sasuke spat. He was not very well-versed in history, but even he knew that Madara was long dead. "Should have picked someone more believable to impersonate."

“Think as you wish,” the pretender said. “It matters not to me. But you will sit, and you will listen to the story I have to tell.”

Sasuke couldn't help it. He laughed. “If you care so little about what I think, why even bother telling me this story?”

“Because you need to hear it. Much of what you think you know, what you have been told, is a lie. You deserve the truth. I have no proof for what I have to say, though I do think it would be more suspect if I conveniently had a piece of evidence stored away for the day I needed to educate you. But you are a shinobi. You are surely capable of evaluating the truth of my words for yourself, yes?”

You must learn to look underneath the underneath, Itachi's voice whispered in his mind again. Yes. This man wanted something from him, that was for certain. If not, there would have been no reason to knock him out and bring him to wherever this place was. No reason to bind him against all movement.

If he could listen, perhaps he could figure out what this man wanted from him. What was truth, and what was misdirection. Sasuke clenched his jaw, and gave a nod. He needed answers, and this man was willing to give him some.

I will know the truth. And everyone who has ever misled me in any way will pay.

Tsunade decided that 30th October was the best day of the year. As she sat and listened to the lizards – Homura and Koharu – prattle on, she considered making it an official holiday. Yes, that would be good. A holiday dedicated to cleaning house, to removing all unwanted scum.

When Danzō finally burst in, his uncovered eye bulging at the sight of the two elders already in deep discussion with Tsunade, she came to a decision. Yes, 30th October would be a public holiday in Konoha indeed.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, walking stick clacking as he strode towards Tsunade's desk. “A meeting of the council, and I was not summoned?”

Tsunade leaned back in her chair. “You see, Danzō,” she purred, enjoying how his eyebrow twitched at the disrespectful address, “funny thing, that. To be summoned to a council meeting, you have to

be *part* of the council. And wouldn't you know it, conspiring against your village *is* grounds for automatic removal from the council."

He stilled. "Conspiring against the village? That would be a charge better applied to *you*, would it not, Tsunade? After all, you are the one who disobeyed an executive order – ratified *by the Daimyo himself* – and used village resources to rescue your apprentice."

Tsunade glanced over at Homura and Koharu, both of whom kept their eyes trained on her. Watching to see what she was going to do. Of course they would. They were glorified cronies, nothing more. They had been swayed to her side for now, but they would wait and see which way the wind blew before they committed.

Well, no matter. She was more than willing to finish this herself. With a smirk, she got up so that she was staring Danzō down. "Uchiha Itachi submitted himself for questioning quite willingly," she said coolly, and relished the way he drew back. It was very slight, but she'd seen it. "Inoichi learned quite a lot of interesting things from walking in his mind. And of course, that allowed me to draw a few conclusions too. Such as the fact that you were aware of a Konoha agent in Akatsuki, and concealed that knowledge from your Hokage. Even when a vital operative was taken into their custody, and that information could have assisted in planning a course of action. Convincing a 13 year old *child* to carry out genocide, going so far as to *lie* to him and mislead him so that he would agree that murder was the only possible course of action. Doujutsu theft."

She paused, and watched as he took a step back, not even bothering to rely on his cane. That injury, and his supposed infirmity was a deception too. She'd guessed, but it was good to know for sure. Tsunade went in for the kill.

"That is not even the limit of what I have evidence for. I also have intelligence that despite the Third's orders, you did not disband your secret division of ANBU. Nor did they come to the village's aid during Orochimaru's invasion. At this moment, the knowledge of your indiscretions is restricted to those within this room. However," she said, raising a finger, "I have placed a copy of all the evidence within secure storage, and given the key to Katsuyu. I have designated a list of people who are authorized to receive that key. In the event that anything... untoward should happen to me, Katsuyu will immediately approach the highest ranking person on the list who is available, and they will receive it. You will be branded a traitor."

He ground his teeth, and Tsunade smirked. There was nothing in the world that could top the pleasure of watching Danzō react like the cornered rat he absolutely was.

“May I assume, *Hokage-sama*, that you have a different alternative in mind?” he ground out.

“In recognition of your services to Konoha, I will allow you to take your retirement. You had best do everything within your power to ensure that I am alive and well, and *remain* so for as long as you wish your freedom.”

“Understood, *Hokage-sama*,” he spat, and turned tail and departed.

“That was nicely handled,” Homura acknowledged, and Koharu nodded.

Tsunade turned and glared at them both as well. “You allowed this to happen, both of you! Don’t think I didn’t notice that you were also aware of Itachi’s status as a spy, and said nothing. You supported Danzō in blocking all attempts to rescue Sakura. You allowed Danzō to move unchecked, never even questioning if what he was doing was right or if he was sharing all the information he had with you. I’m putting up with you for now because to overhaul the entire council will bring a headache I don’t want to deal with. But let’s be clear: you will no longer be involved in any capacity in the running of Konoha! Am I understood?”

They mumbled their agreement and quickly made themselves scarce. Tsunade waited, and Uchiha Itachi landed lightly on her floor from his hiding place in the rafters, his head bowed. “None of that, now,” she muttered irritably. “You’re not ANBU, and you’ve turned down my invitation to rejoin ANBU, so there’s really no need for those formalities.”

He stood, inclining his head. “Hai, Hokage-sama.”

“Be careful. If he stole Uchiha Shisui’s eye, who knows how many other eyes he’s stolen? You’re not going to break my apprentice’s heart by dying, understood?”

“Hai, Hokage-sama.”

“He may already suspect. You may be up against more than just him. Are you sure you are able to do this alone?”

Itachi exhaled. “No,” he admitted. “But it must be done. For Sakura’s safety, and that of the children we will have. For Sasuke to have any chance at all of returning to Konoha. I must strike now, before he has a chance to shore up his defenses.”

“Then go with my blessing, Uchiha. I only have one order for you: *do not die.*”

Sasuke sat on the top of the tallest skyscraper in Ame, and watched as the rain fell gently upon the streets. The peace of it was at odds with the emotions churning within him.

The team members he’d gathered – Juugo, Karin, and Suigetsu – stood around him, waiting. He could feel their hesitance, their reluctance to set him off. Not for the first time, Sasuke found himself missing Team 7. They wouldn’t have been so subservient to him. Naruto would have yelled at him and picked a fight. Kakashi would have gone on reading his *Icha Icha* and given him obfuscating bits of advice. Sakura would have thrown herself at him in an effort to comfort him, regardless of his own feelings on the matter.

She won’t be comforting you anymore, the same voice that had pushed him to seek out Orochimaru sneered. *She has Itachi now.*

Itachi...

He swallowed as he remembered Madara’s disdain. His brother was a dog of Konoha, he’d said. He’d set aside all his own feelings and killed the entire clan on Konoha’s orders. And then, when Konoha had sent Sakura to give him new orders – to return to Konoha, to restart the Uchiha line – he’d obeyed without question like the dog he was.

Sasuke felt sick as he looked back on the past ten years of his life. He’d trained with only one purpose – to kill Itachi. What was the point of all those years, if Itachi wasn’t a murderous psychopath?

And somewhere, in the back of his head, he’d always believed that he’d return to Konoha triumphant after killing Itachi, and that Sakura would be waiting for him. Now, knowing his home had betrayed him all along, knowing that they’d ordered Sakura to seduce Itachi, and that she’d obeyed, left a bitter taste in his mouth.

But it all didn’t add up. He would have believed it, *could* have believed it, if he hadn’t seen Itachi’s anguish for himself. If he hadn’t seen Sakura’s panic, her eyes wide with terror in a way that had

previously been reserved for him. Whatever was between them, it was greater than genjutsu. Greater than mere orders. In those moments, Itachi had almost looked like the caring older brother he'd been before the massacre.

He checked the surrounding area again for any shinobi presence. If Madara was around, he was concealing it well, and there would be nothing Sasuke could do about it. "Go to Sendai," he said softly, as if by lowering his voice, he could avoid being overheard. "That's where Orochimaru's intelligence reports indicate she was captured. See what you can discover. I need to know what's the truth."

They nodded their assent and left, though not before Karin hesitated with a lingering look. Sasuke ran his hands through his hair, wondering what to do about her. She'd do better not caring about him. After all, the last girl who loved him had almost died at his hands twice.

"It's over, Shisui," Itachi said, kneeling before the cenotaph. He'd considered going to the Naka River, but this felt more right. The river had been where Shisui had died. The cenotaph, though – it was a representation of how Shisui had lived. Selflessly, in service to his village.

He continued to pitch his voice low, so that while the winds would carry his words to their intended recipient, the ANBU watching him – the protection detail he hardly needed – would not hear what he had to say.

"I wish I could have recovered your eye, but he used it to perform Izanagi. A vile jutsu."

He tried to imagine how Shisui would have responded, but it was beyond him. He'd never been able to decipher the way his best friend's mind worked – he'd constantly surprised Itachi with his observations and his wisecracks.

Much like Sakura did, he thought wryly.

"I would have used Izanami to stop him. I thought about it, actually. He meant well. He wanted the best for the village – he was just too blinded by his own prejudices to see a different way. If he could have seen the light, he would have been a formidable ally." A pause. "But Sasuke will need my eyes. Especially when he begins to lose his sight."

He sighed as he again contemplated his brother. "I made so many mistakes, Shisui," he admitted. "I don't know what to do. You would have been better at this. You could always drag me back into the real world when I got lost within my own thoughts. Sakura's like that too, actually. You would have liked her. But I can't ask her to help me with Sasuke. Not after everything he's put her through."

Sensing movement, he immediately stood, schooling his face to a neutral expression. He'd revealed far too much of his inner thoughts and feelings in the interrogation cell, consumed as he'd been by his worries and regrets. At the moment, he hadn't cared. But thinking back on it, he felt as if he would rather have paraded about Konoha nude than discard his privacy in that manner.

He moved closer to the cenotaph, intending to run his fingers along the grooves that marked Shisui's name before leaving. But as his eyes scanned the structure, he realized with a sinking feeling that Shisui's name was not actually carved into it.

He walked around the monument, examining every inch of it, willing the name to be there, even as he knew it would not.

"None of their names are there," Kakashi's voice said, in that same gentle tone he'd used when Sakura had been hurt. As if Itachi was a skittish animal that could be spooked by a stern tone of voice.

"Because they didn't die in service to the village," Itachi completed, his mouth dry. He'd known, but he'd thought... Shisui had committed suicide, yes, but he had given his life for Konoha. Itachi had made *sure* to report on that to the Third.

And they hadn't even honoured his sacrifice.

It wasn't right. Almost unconsciously, Itachi drew a kunai, not caring how the auras of his watchers twitched uneasily, and began scratching Shisui's name into the cenotaph. Shisui had died to avert bloodshed, and Itachi would make sure that was recognized. He did not use any chakra in this labour. It did not feel right to ease his action in any way.

All the while, Kakashi stood beside him, his gaze curious and non-judgemental. Once Itachi finished, his chest heaving, sweat trickling down his forehead, the man he'd once called senpai spoke. "I did not think the village elders would have allowed the monument to be modified."

“That would presume they had the ability to object.”

“Then they are – “

“One perished. An unfortunate accident. A jutsu he experimented with after hearing news of his dismissal from the council backfired. His entire estate went up in flames.”

“That is a pity.”

“Indeed.”

There was no need for more words. Itachi guessed that Kakashi would succeed Tsunade-sama as Hokage, and that he would be well aware of how Itachi's ANBU tail would swear up and down that he had not left the cenotaph all afternoon if it became necessary.

They were his protection detail in more ways than one.

He looked again at Kakashi, whose posture was deceptively casual – hands in his pockets, back slouching. It required a great deal of familiarity with the man to recognize the stiff set of his shoulders. Itachi paused, considering what he knew of Kakashi, before handing him his kunai.

Kakashi simply quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Hatake Sakumo lived his life in service to the village. His name deserves to be remembered as well.”

Kakashi eyed the blade, before his eyes met Itachi's.

“He may have, but he died in selfishness. There was no nobility to it, apart from a desire to escape condemnation.”

“Condemnation that was ill-deserved.”

“Perhaps. But to be shinobi is to endure, and he was unable to fulfil that requirement. He was a good man and father, but a poor shinobi.”

“The purpose of the cenotaph is not to discriminate between good and bad shinobi. It is to remember them all.”

Itachi thought he could see the edges of Kakashi's lips quirk upwards underneath the mask, but there was no mirth to be found anywhere in his expression.

“I do not pretend that I have the ability to discern good from bad, in any case. We both know who runs the Akatsuki, and what he once stood for. Given the opportunity, I might choose to remove his name myself.”

Itachi hesitated a moment, before slowly reaching a hand out and placing it on Kakashi's shoulder. Sakura had taught him that none of them could make it alone. None of them *should* be expected to. If Kakashi did not want the touch, he was skilled enough to move out of reach.

He did not.

“I do not know what happened to change him into what he is. But his name will still serve as remembrance of who he *was*. There is still meaning to honouring the Obito you knew. The Obito who spat on years of tradition to give you that eye.”

Kakashi slowly looked up, and met Itachi's eyes.

“If you truly believe that, why stop with Shisui's name? Why not carve in the names of all the Uchiha shinobi who perished that night?”

It was Itachi's turn to smile humourlessly. “One name may be overlooked. But eighty-two names – I believe there are limits to even Hokage-sama's kindness and patience.” He paused. “A hundred and forty-nine Uchiha perished that night. Eighty-two of them were shinobi. Their names may not be engraved on any stone, but they are permanently inscribed in my mind.”

Kakashi looked away from him. His eyes roved their surroundings, never resting on any one thing. “How do you live with yourself?” he asked. “How do you continue, knowing that the guilty whom you loved and the innocent both died by your hands?”

From anyone else, that question would have sounded like an accusation. But from Kakashi – the one who had been infamously known in ANBU as the friend-killer – it smacked of desperation for absolution, for peace from the demons that haunted them both.

“I don't,” Itachi admitted, continuing to watch Kakashi steadily. “All this time, I was only waiting to die at Sasuke's hands. Even now, I wonder if I truly have the right to continue living, and to seek happiness. But Sakura... she made me realize that my death would not solve anything. It would be running away from the consequences of my actions. There are things that only I can accomplish, and all I can

do now is to try, in some way, to keep making amends for all I've done."

Kakashi nodded slowly. Itachi hesitated. This was highly personal, and he'd never wanted to share it with anyone. But Sakura had not condemned him for it, nor had she pitied him. She'd accepted it. And he remembered how all the times she'd spoken to him about her own losses had helped him see sense in his.

Perhaps given a chance, sharing his experience with Kakashi would help the man move on? He was clearly still struggling. Itachi thought back to how Kakashi had stuck his neck out for Itachi, telling him he wouldn't stop him if he fled, even when he couldn't have been certain of Itachi's loyalties. Even after Itachi had tormented him in the Tsukuyomi. That sealed the decision for him.

"My parents understood why I had to do it," he said at last. "My father asked me to take care of Sasuke. He told me I was a kind child."

Kakashi made a choked sound. Itachi turned away, deciding it was time he left. Kakashi would certainly need some privacy, and perhaps he'd given Sakura enough time with her other loved ones that his presence now would not be burdensome.

"Itachi," Kakashi called out. He turned back, and Kakashi stretched out his hand. A moment of understanding passed between them, and Itachi handed him the kunai.

"Do you wish for me to stay?" Itachi asked.

Kakashi nodded, and Itachi maintained a vigil as Kakashi carved Hatake Sakumo's name into the monument. He hesitated over Obito's name, trembling. Itachi watched steadily. Finally, Kakashi turned away from the cenotaph, and passed Itachi's kunai back to him.

They exchanged no more words, for it was unnecessary. They understood each other – perhaps the only two in the village that *could*.

Chapter End Notes

Don't be too hard on Sasuke, please - I know he's really been a little bitch these few chapters, but he really hasn't learned to think properly! He's only working on his critical thinking skills now.

I'm so glad I finally got the chance to write in the Itachi and

Kakashi bonding that I've been wanting to! And yes, I really skipped over Itachi assassinating Danzo - it really isn't that important to the story, and more importantly to Itachi's character. I just included that it happened because I really couldn't see Tsunade leaving that loose end unsnipped.

Thanks so much to all the love and support you guys have been giving me! Y'all are the best. I know I haven't been responding to all your reviews, but I promise that I am constantly re-reading them whenever I need motivation to work on this story! I will eventually reply all of you, I promise!

This Is Fine

Chapter Notes

Warning - this chapter delves pretty deeply into post-traumatic stress reactions. I don't hold back on the thoughts and feelings involved, so read with caution!

All of Sakura's daydreams about what it would be like to return home had not accounted for the general unpleasantness of frightened people.

It was just supposed to be a nice walk home from the hospital. She'd *finally* been discharged, and she'd wanted to be seen going about Konoha with Itachi. She had plenty of experience with how women threw themselves at a handsome Uchiha, and she wanted to make it clear to the village that he was already taken.

As it turned out, lovesick girls would be the least of her worries.

Even though shishou had done her best to clear Itachi's name, whispers and scowls followed them as they walked, hands interlaced. Especially those of the civilians, who really couldn't be expected to know better. Who didn't realize that the two shinobi could hear every word they said.

"The mad Uchiha."

"She's supposed to be the Hokage's apprentice, and she's shacked up with a missing-nin?"

"Hokage-sama said he was framed. Framed by who, I'd like to know – who else could take down an entire clan?"

"He infiltrated the village after Orochimaru's attack, did you hear? Took down Kakashi of the Sharingan! And they still think he comes in peace now?"

"Uchiha are supposed to be masters of genjutsu. Wouldn't be surprised if he's fooled everyone, and is just waiting to murder us all."

"Can't believe he has the guts to just walk in to the village. He probably thinks that he owns the place after he seduced the Hokage's apprentice. Thought the girl had better judgement than that."

“He’s been with Akatsuki for ten years, won’t be surprised if he’s as twisted as them.”

Sakura peeked up at Itachi’s face, but there was no change to his expression. It was as calm as ever, with no tightness around his eyes. He really wasn’t upset by the words they heard. He’d been prepared for them, in a way that she hadn’t. She thought back to their conversation, how she’d insisted she could deal with the scorn of the villagers, how she’d protect their child from them. She’d never faced wholesale hatred and suspicion, and it dawned on her that this was how Naruto and Sasuke had both lived. And they’d both been *children*.

Sensing her gaze, he met her eyes, and his thumb gently caressed hers. Reassuring her, comforting her, even though it was *him* they were speaking about. She felt like her heart was going to burst.

“Do not worry for your reputation,” he said, so softly that she could only hear his words due to sharpened shinobi senses. “I have seen how the people of this village respect you. They will come around eventually.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder, marvelling again at her sheer fortune in finding someone like him – with his kindness, his goodness. The villagers be damned. If she could be with him, that was all that mattered.

Eventually, they reached her house. “Are you... do you want to come in?” she asked, heart pounding. He smiled wanly.

“Given the choice, I would spend every waking moment with you,” he admitted, brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. “But I know you wish to be with your mother, and spend time with your friends. They are not comfortable around me.”

“That doesn’t matter,” she argued. Stupid, self-sacrificing man, always worrying about others. It shouldn’t matter. She’d *make* everyone accept him, starting with her own circle. He smiled gently at her.

“I wish to visit the Uchiha compound anyway,” he replied. “I understand from Hokage-sama that it was left as it was after the clean-up was completed.”

“Do you want company?” she asked. “You shouldn’t go there alone.”

“I won’t be. You’re always with me,” he assured her, pulling his necklace out of his pocket. It had been taken off her neck before her

surgery, and thankfully, shishou hadn't said anything about it. Sakura had given it back to Itachi when he'd visited later. Her mother would blow a gasket if she saw Sakura suddenly wandering about with a necklace, and she hadn't wanted to deal with that headache. They'd need to be officially married first. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she remembered his declaration that he'd wanted to introduce himself as her husband.

"It was yours first," she replied, trying to dispel her embarrassment. Really, it was ridiculous – why was she feeling so shy all of a sudden? It occurred to her then that her mother would definitely be watching them from the windows.

It was the change in their circumstances, she realized. In the life-or-death situation that had been her captivity, it had been utterly natural for them to declare their love as intensely and passionately as they had. But here, in Konoha, surrounded by the shadows of her childhood memories and the weight of the expectations on her, followed by the ghosts of his past, it felt as if she had to play it cool. She wondered if he sensed it too, if that was why he was so insistent about ensuring she spent at least a few hours apart from him each day.

The thought made her a little sad, and she resolved that when he finally proposed, she'd marry him as soon as possible. He didn't really have anyone except her in Konoha. Where did he spend his time when he wasn't with her?

"It belongs to you now," he said softly. He caressed her cheek with his thumb, and she shivered. Her mother's sensibilities be damned, she was so ready to bring him up to her room and let him make love to her then and there. "It is only waiting for the right moment. Then, we will mingle our chakra upon it, and it will adorn your throat for as long as you wish it to."

"It will stay there for as long as I live," she promised, and tiptoed so she could kiss his cheek. He smiled, that smile she so loved that lightened the lines of stress engraved upon his face.

"I'll see you soon," he said, and turned to leave. Sakura watched him walk away, a goofy smile on her face. Honestly, that was already romantic enough for her. His standards were too ridiculously high.

Itachi set foot within the borders of the compound.

Nothing happened.

He smiled wryly at his own melodrama. It was not as if lightning would strike him for daring to re-enter the place.

He walked through the deserted compound, and found to his surprise that he was not haunted by nightmarish spectres as he'd expected. Nor did he feel again the anguish of slaughtering his brethren, or the ache of memories from his childhood. This place was very different from the compound he'd carried out the massacre in. That had been teeming with the life of an entire clan – lights in the windows, clothes hanging on lines, gardens that were carefully tended, stores with banners promoting their wares.

This place was just... empty. It was a locale of overgrown grass and weeds, of rotting wood and collapsed roofs.

Still, his footsteps traced the long-familiar path to his home. He paused outside, taking in the cracks in the wall from where he'd once thrown a kunai. He'd been in a terrible temper that day – mourning Shisui's death, trying to act normal for Sasuke's sake.

He entered his family home, and realized that there was nothing there.

The floor had been scrubbed clean of the bloodstains. The rugs that had covered the floors were gone, as were the pictures, the books, the weapons. To see it, one would never realize that this had been home to a family – a dysfunctional one, to be sure, but a loving one nonetheless.

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He'd viewed the visit to the compound as a penance he had to undergo. It was part of the reason why he hadn't wanted Sakura to accompany him – he hadn't wanted his memories with her, of joy and hope, to be tainted by the despair he was sure would coat the entire compound.

As he turned to leave, a presence flickered into being behind him. He turned to face him.

"Uzumaki-san," he greeted, shifting his stance so he'd be ready to dodge if it became necessary. From what he knew from the days he'd spent watching Sasuke's genin team through his crows, this boy – a man now, he reminded himself – liked to settle things with fists. And he was none too fond of him, if his reaction when he'd first come across him clutching Sakura's injured body was any indication.

"I don't believe that you were framed," Uzumaki said, his voice low and gruff, shaking with the effort to remain even. "You forget that I was there when you attacked Sasuke. When you *strangled* him, and used that genjutsu on him. He wasn't the same again after that."

He had to handle this carefully. If that was the story Uzumaki had been told, then his security clearance was not high enough. He wished for a moment that the Hokage had chosen to release the truth instead, and cursed himself for his selfishness.

"It was necessary to avoid blowing my cover."

"No," he said, striding towards Itachi. "You're lying. I know it. Sasuke was a lot of things, but he wasn't easily fooled. If he said you were the one that killed them, then that's the truth, believe it!"

"Have you ever known Sakura to be easily fooled?"

Uzumaki paused. "No," he said reluctantly. "But Sasuke changed after he encountered you. You might have done the same to Sakura-chan too."

"Then perhaps you might want to speak with Sakura directly," Itachi replied coolly. "I'm certain she would gladly enlighten you as to just how much she has changed."

He turned to leave, then hesitated as the memory of Sakura's sorrow from that morning intruded on him. He was no longer in Akatsuki. He had to remember that. His life, and his agenda, did not hinge upon maintaining the cold façade. In fact, it was quite the opposite. To continue the act would only serve to hurt Sakura, to impede the life they wanted to build.

He turned back to Uzumaki. "Pardon me," he said, modulating his voice to be more even. "It is... difficult for me to speak about these things. Especially here."

"You changed your mind awfully quickly."

"I have been a spy for a long time," Itachi admitted. "It is almost instinctual for me to deflect queries about myself. But I am... trying to be better. For Sakura."

Uzumaki's eyes softened. "You really care about her."

"I do. She saved me from living a half-life, only waiting for death at

my brother's hands."

Uzumaki took a half-step back, a dumbfounded look on his face. Itachi found himself wondering if he'd ever been that simple, that easy to read. He spent a moment imagining what life might have been like, to have had a friend like that in his childhood. Even Shisui had been rather guarded. It was a necessity, when one grew up in a clan like the Uchiha.

"You – you wanted Sasuke to kill you?" he gasped. "Wait – that's why you tortured him. So he'd be more motivated to kill you."

Itachi nodded. It appeared his initial assessment of Uzumaki was correct – he lacked any kind of subtlety, but his intelligence and understanding of human behaviour was not to be underestimated.

"I was selfish. I prioritized my desire for death over Sasuke's well-being," he admitted, much as it pained him to do so. He barely knew this man. But Uzumaki was important to Sakura – so important that she'd been willing to make a deal with one she considered an enemy, all to protect him. Itachi would open up to him, try to build a friendship of sorts with him, if it would make Sakura happy.

And perhaps, this could be the first step to rebuilding some semblance of a relationship with Sasuke? It seemed too much to hope for, but at this point, he'd take anything that could create that path for him.

"You're not so bad after all, Itachi," Uzumaki suddenly said, a wide grin plastered on his face. Itachi winced inwardly at the informality, though he supposed he had told him enough about his personal matters to warrant it. "Say, do you like ramen? There's this *amazing* place called Ichiraku's, believe it!"

Sakura snapped on her gloves, feeling a giddy joy rise within her as she looked at herself in the mirror. She straightened her medic's coat, and twirled, grinning. She felt as if she was finally herself again.

Finally, she didn't have to deal with intrigue, didn't have to worry about exposing herself, didn't have to worry about when Akatsuki would decide to kill her – she could simply be herself. Could simply follow her life's passion, and *heal*.

She walked down the hospital hallways, greeting her fellow medics and nurses as she passed. It didn't matter that it was probably one, or many, of them who had spread the gossip about her and Itachi, and

how attached they'd been to each other when she'd been recovering. It was normal and human to gossip, and well, it meant that any potential competitors she might have to face would already know that he was off the market.

It didn't matter. These were her friends and colleagues, and she was back where she belonged. She trusted them to work together with her, to have her back, not to spread lies about her or sabotage her efforts in any way. She did. She'd known them all for years, after all.

She went about the routine procedures, setting broken bones and healing scrapes, pretending she didn't feel the evaluative gazes of her co-workers. It was all *fine*, really, they were just concerned. Anyone would be after the kind of ordeal she'd had, captured by the enemy, returning half-dead, and getting back to work immediately after being discharged. She smiled at her patients, made small talk with them, and refused to wonder which of them would smile back to her face and return home to continue slandering her and Itachi.

This was better than staying home, checking and re-checking her seals to make sure nobody could break in. It was all so silly, really, it wasn't as if she'd been captured at home – she'd been out on a mission, and vulnerable. But the paranoia remained, and it didn't help that she'd gotten used to having Itachi's arms around her, his warmth at her back, whenever she slept. Her own bed, which had once been the epitome of comfort and relaxation, was now too wide, too empty, too cold.

“ANBU Team Kappa reporting in, with serious injuries! All personnel with clearance, proceed to Operating Theatre One immediately!” the trauma department's head medic shouted. Sakura steeled herself, and ran with everything she had. Trauma surgery was where she excelled. This time, she wouldn't have to worry about watching for enemies, about her chakra reserves, whether her patient would die due to her indecision – she was safe in the hospital, and she wasn't alone.

Yet, when she stepped through the doorway, scrubs and hairnet in place, she stopped short. The other medics who had dashed in behind her to answer the code simply pushed her aside, running to attend to the patients.

One of them had dark hair bound in a ponytail – it was brown, she could tell, but it didn't take much for it to bleed to black in her imagination, for his features to become sharper and more delicate.

“Haruno-sensei!” one of the more junior medics exclaimed. “We can’t close the wound – it seems like there’s poison involved!”

Poison. She knew how to deal with poison. She’d do a diagnostic scan to see where the poison was acting, try to identify the kinds of compounds involved, then she’d decide which antidote to administer. If they couldn’t close the wound, it meant that the blood wasn’t clotting – that indicated a blood thinner of some sort. They had antidotes to deal with that. And if they didn’t have an appropriate antidote, she’d perform an extraction to physically remove the poison molecules from the patient’s body. In the meantime, she’d have the junior medics continue to keep the mystical palm technique running – chest wounds couldn’t be left alone.

It was a procedure Sakura had done hundreds of times, so why was she frozen? Why were her feet stuck to the floor?

It felt as if the world fell away. There was only her and the patient – *dying, he’s dying, and you’re useless, frozen as usual*. The sounds of the operating theatre around her – the beeping of the instruments, the instructions the medics shouted to one another – all of those came to her as if through fog – distant, unimportant.

And she *couldn’t move*.

She thought she’d heard someone yelling her name again. She couldn’t tell. She was back in Lightning, surrounded by rock formations, frantically working on closing Itachi’s multiple wounds, stopping his bleeding – both internal and external – all while agonizing over whether more enemies would come for them, if she’d lose the man she loved due to her own incompetence. She was pinned against a rock wall, trapped, panicking and wondering if Itachi’s heart would give out again, if she was going to be forced to watch him die.

The only sound that came to her was the prolonged beep of a heart monitor, indicating a flatline. The patient was dead, gone, and it was all her fault. Her own heart pounded in her chest, she felt as if she was going to throw up, she couldn’t *move* –

“Sakura! Sakura!”

Reality was slow in crystallizing around her, the white walls of the hospital coming back into focus. There was a mahogany desk, piled high with paperwork, with a bronze nameplate on it that read Katou Shizune – she was in Shizune’s office. But it wasn’t Shizune who was currently staring at her with worry, shaking her shoulders – it was

Ino.

Sakura blinked, and realized that there were tears streaming down her face. “Ino,” she croaked out, and watched as her friend’s face melted into relief.

“Sakura, you scared me,” Ino said, shaking her head. “It was horrible – Keiko-sensei told me you needed to be removed from the operating theatre, you weren’t responding. Tsunade-sama said she’d come to speak with you after the surgery.”

Ino’s face was clean, her white coat pristine. She had the requisite clearance, but not the ability, to work on the kinds of serious injuries that warranted the use of Operating Theatre One.

I don’t have the ability anymore either.

The realization was cold, stark, and frightened her as nothing had in the past few weeks. Despite everything, she’d always had her faith in her own abilities and fortitude.

What was she, if she could not heal? If she could not make appropriate judgements in times of crisis? If she was a liability that had to be moved out of the way so the actual qualified people could do their work?

Could she even call herself shinobi anymore?

How was she to protect her precious people like this?

A glass bottle was slammed onto the desk, making Sakura jump. She’d been so lost in thought that she’d stopped paying attention to her surroundings. Another fatal error, one that could have cost her life – or someone else’s – had she been anywhere else.

Shishou dropped into the chair by her side, and turned so she was facing Sakura. She uncorked the bottle, and poured a glass for Sakura. Sake, she realized.

“Drink,” shishou said. “Then, we’ll talk.”

She didn’t really want to. But she supposed that was all she was good for now – being a weakling who needed alcohol to fortify her against emotions that were too difficult to bear –

She stopped, horrified as she caught up with the implications of that

train of thought. She didn't think shishou was weak – quite the opposite. But where shishou had been through true horrors – both her lover and her brother dying in her arms, unable to save both – what had Sakura experienced?

Still, she was a good little pupil who did as her master instructed, so she swirled the cup and threw it back, feeling the comforting burn of the liquor as it went down her throat.

It was as she was putting her glass back down that she realized shishou had not poured *herself* a glass.

She looked up, the liquor giving her the courage she needed to meet amber eyes that shone with love – not with condemnation, as she'd feared. She exhaled, feeling herself sag into her chair. It wasn't as bad as she'd thought.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Sakura asked. Better to get it over with. Then she could head home and cry her eyes out over her termination and try to put herself back together before Itachi sought her out. He was visiting the site of the massacre. It would take a toll on him, and she had to be strong enough to support him instead of falling to pieces.

"Hyuuga Kirei? He's quite alright. Satsuki had the presence of mind to tie a tourniquet for him, so that slowed the bleeding long enough for Shizune to administer the antidote. We didn't even need to amputate the leg."

"His... leg? But the chest wound – it was –"

Shishou shook her head slowly, forehead creasing. "Sakura, the chest wound was just a superficial wound. It was the point of entry for the poison, yes, but it didn't nick any major arteries or veins." She took one of Sakura's hands in hers, and squeezed gently. "It's alright, Sakura. This wouldn't be the first time I've seen a medic freeze, and it won't be the last either. No harm was done, and all the patients are out of danger. Now. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Sakura could no longer meet her eyes. Somehow, she felt even worse. She hadn't even registered that the injured man had a wound on his leg – her attention had been entirely captured by the chest wound.

"I screwed up," she said, looking at her shoes.

"None of that, now," shishou said briskly, tapping her on the head. "I asked you to report what happened, not your opinion of yourself."

Facts only. And look at me when you're speaking to me, brat. I know you have better manners than that."

Sakura nodded, and cleared her throat, trying to pull herself together. "When I looked at him – I, I couldn't move. I just kept remembering when Itachi was injured the same way, trying to protect *me*, all because I was too stupid, too helpless, to move and do something to help him." She gulped, trying to stem the flow of tears. Why was she crying so much? She was a woman grown. Surely, she was better than this.

"And – and – I didn't even – didn't *realize* that his leg was injured. All I could see was the chest wound, and it was, my legs, they just wouldn't work. I knew what I had to do, but I couldn't do it. I was just stuck there, remembering trying to heal Itachi, trying to stop him from dying, and remembering how Konan attacked in the middle of that, and how he and I could have both died there."

"Sakura," shishou said, again in that oddly gentle tone of voice. "Inoichi gave me a complete reporting of what he saw in Itachi's mind. The incident you're referring to – it was when you were facing Darui's squad, yes? And Itachi also thought you'd made the right call, since for you to attack could have irreparably strained Konoha's alliance with Kumo."

"Yes, but – "

"Furthermore, we've already spoken about this. You've been through a terrible ordeal. And even in the midst of it, you kept a cool enough head to secure as many advantages for us as you could. Because of you, only three members of Akatsuki remain active. Now, it is time for you took some time to *rest*, Sakura. Allow your mind to heal from the terrible strain you've experienced."

"I can't!" Sakura screamed, suddenly feeling as if she couldn't remain still. She got up and began pacing, fists clenched. She couldn't – wouldn't – destroy Shizune's office. But all that agitation had to go somewhere. "I can't, shishou. Whenever I'm at home, I keep panicking, thinking my seals won't be enough to keep anyone out. It's so stupid, it's not like I was captured at home, but I'm still so *afraid*. And I keep wondering if Akatsuki has eyes and ears in Konoha, and I keep remembering things, and I – I shouldn't be this weak! You call it an ordeal, but it wasn't even that bad. Shinobi have returned from missions where they're tortured in dungeons – what did I go through? I had Itachi to protect me all along. I need to just, just get over this."

She found herself enfolded in a hug then, surrounded by warmth. A hand stroked her head, and it reminded her so much of the first time Itachi had shown her affection.

“My baby’s dead, shishou,” she whispered, and allowed her tears to flow. “My baby’s dead, and it’s all my fault. Itachi said it wasn’t, but it is. If only I’d trusted him, if I hadn’t provoked Sasuke, it wouldn’t have happened. I got cocky. I was already pregnant when I fought Hidan and Deidara, and I had such horrible injuries from the explosions, and I had the Creation Rebirth jutsu running too – and I unconsciously shielded my womb then, and I thought that if I just did that again, it could work. But it didn’t.”

“There, there,” shishou murmured. “Just let it all out, Sakura. I know you say you haven’t been through a lot, but you *have*. And even if you hadn’t, that doesn’t matter. It’s not a competition to see who’s been hurt worst. If something hurt you, then it did, and all we can really do is accept our feelings and grow from it.”

“But how can I move on? I can’t even trust my own judgement anymore. How can I be a shinobi, a medic, like this?”

“We all make errors in judgement, Sakura,” she said softly. “I still wonder if things would have been different if I hadn’t abandoned the village. If I’d been around, would fewer people have died in the Kyuubi attack? Would Sarutobi-sensei have stepped down and taken his retirement earlier, and would the massacre have needed to occur? Could I have stopped Orochimaru? And when you were taken, I just kept thinking – I did this, I didn’t prepare for the possibility that Akatsuki might go after you, and if I hadn’t been so reliant on sake to deal with everything, maybe I might have been clear-headed enough to prevent it.”

“That’s not true, you might have just gotten yourself killed in the Kyuubi’s attack or in Orochimaru’s invasion, and there’s no way you could have known I’d be taken – ”

“Exactly. I couldn’t have known. And neither could you. Stop beating yourself up, Sakura. You expect yourself to live up to an ideal that’s impossible to meet. You were in a hostile situation, and you say *now* that you had Itachi, but it took you time to figure out that you could trust him. You prepared a suicide pill for yourself, you stabbed yourself, you made a deal with someone you thought was an enemy of Konoha – and you say you did not suffer?”

“I mean when you put it like that...” Sakura grumbled.

Shishou laughed, and patted her on the back. “Sakura, I took you as my apprentice because I saw a fire within you. The Will of Fire, the resolve to do everything within your power to protect those you love. And it still burns bright within you, even after everything. Give yourself time. You will recover.”

“Will I?”

“You will. Think of it this way – we’ve spoken before, about how we as a village need to do more to care for shinobi who are traumatized by their experiences. You now have first-hand experience of how they suffer. Use that experience. Understand what helps you heal, and teach it to others. Help them find what helps *them* too.”

Sakura suddenly felt as if a flame had been lit within her chest. The cloud of despair lifted, and she could finally see a way out. She’d experienced helplessness, terror, isolation, grief – and all of those had meaning.

“You’re right,” she said softly, finally able to look up and meet her master’s eyes.

“Of course I am, you damn brat. Now take yourself out of here, and I don’t want to see you back in the hospital unless you’re here to seek treatment for at least four weeks, you understand? You’ve got a pretty boy mooning over you, go spend some time with him, give your mother a show and a heart attack too maybe.”

“Shishou!”

Rumination

Chapter Notes

I'm hopping on a plane in 9 hours so this was probably a Bad Idea but... self-control is pretty much non-existent at this point

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a soft plink against her windows. Sakura shot up from her bed, pulling out the kunai she kept under her pillow. She slowly made her way over, keeping her back against the wall so that nobody could sneak up on her.

The knot in her chest loosened when she realized it was only Itachi, arm poised to toss another pebble at her window. "You could have just come in," she whispered as she raised the shutters.

"And frighten you even more? I think not," he replied, nodding to the kunai gripped loosely in her hand. She flushed, and Itachi cupped her face.

"You forget that I, too, lived in fear and slept with one eye open until we began sharing a bed. There is nothing to be ashamed of," he said, his low tones soothing her heart as nothing else had managed to that day. She needed him then. Needed to feel his comforting arms around her, be enveloped in his steadfast love, to fill the gaping chasm within her heart.

She tiptoed and kissed him – a simple, chaste thing. With uncharacteristic haste, he tossed her onto the bed, and was on top of her, lips moving over hers with desperation.

"You missed me that much?" Sakura teased impishly, after they broke apart, even as she felt the same sense of urgency to be one with him.

He simply gazed at her with scorching eyes. "A single day without being with you is a single day too long."

She *needed* him. She hiked up his shirt, appreciating yet again the feel of his abs under her hands. His physique was nothing out of the ordinary for shinobi. Yet, something about touching Itachi was just better than touching anyone else. It was the way his muscles jumped under her touch, the way his breaths became shallower, the way he watched her with hunger as she explored his body. He wanted her,

and it was a heady feeling, watching him react just to her simple touches.

“Are you protected?” he asked, voice husky.

“Yes,” she said simply. She’d reapplied the seal after she’d been discharged from the hospital. It was too soon after their loss to even consider doing otherwise.

He pulled his shirt off and tossed it aside, and pressed his lips against her – a hard, bruising, kiss. He ran his tongue over her lips, and she eagerly opened her mouth to him, enjoying how their tongues swirled around each other, his grip on her arms growing tighter.

Her hand carded through his hair, pulling his hair tie out. They broke apart, and she sighed as his inky black locks spilled over his shoulders.

“You’re so beautiful,” she murmured. “So unreal. I can’t believe you want me.”

He laughed hoarsely. “How many times must we have this conversation, my love?” He took her hand, and placed it against his chest. His heart was racing. “Feel,” he urged. “Feel how it beats for you. How it beats *because* of you. Because of your belief that I could do better.”

She felt herself flushing yet again. His words – they simultaneously soothed and aroused. “Itachi...” she breathed.

“You are the only one for me. Nothing else, no *one* else, in this world could ever compare. Not even the children we will have,” he said, nuzzling along her collarbone. More than anything else, the faint flush to his cheeks showed her the truth of his words. *He wouldn’t feel that way if he knew what I’m really like. A coward.*

He tugged at her shirt, and she lifted herself up so he could pull it off. His eyes glittered when he realized that she wasn’t wearing anything else, and his hands cradled her breasts. He pressed gentle kisses to both nipples before thumbing at them. Sakura trembled at the waves of heat the motion sent through her. All the while, Itachi trailed kisses along her neck, her collarbones, her shoulders, as if determined to lay his lips on every inch of skin.

She stroked his hair, feeling so loved, yet so unworthy. She wasn’t the same Sakura who’d talked him out of a pointless sacrifice. She wasn’t the same Sakura who’d fought by his side, protected him from Konan,

killed Sasori before he could land a hit on Itachi.

She wanted him so much, but knew deep in her bones that this wouldn't last. Couldn't last. It was only a matter of time before he came to his senses and left her like everyone else did. And it would hurt worse than all the ones that came before, because she loved him so deeply, and because her hopes that what they had could be for forever just refused to die, no matter how much she tried to rein in her expectations.

But maybe, she could just allow herself to enjoy this moment first. That couldn't be so bad, could it?

He flipped them so that she was on top of him, straddling him. "Itachi," she gasped, the hollow ache within her becoming stronger. He undid his pants, and Sakura helped him slide it down. She notched him against her entrance, and sank down on him, stretching around him, until he filled her, completing her.

She felt whole again in that moment, with his eyes gazing upon her nude form with wonder and devotion. They'd slept together a few times already, but each time, he treated it with the same reverence as if it was their first time all over again. The hope again roared to life in her chest – a sweet, painful, thing.

He gripped her hips, helping her raise and lower herself atop him, but still allowing her to set the pace. His hips continually thrust up to meet hers. For a while, there were no sounds except for the mingled rasps of their breaths, the wet slap-slap of their thighs meeting each other.

"Fuck, Sakura. Oh, *fuck*," he groaned as she raked her nails down his chest, and Sakura couldn't help but let out a joyous laugh. This man, who was always so stoic, so controlled, came apart for *her*.

He reached out and began stroking her clit exactly the way she liked – he truly was a prodigy; it hadn't taken him long to figure out exactly how to make her sing. He could draw out her torture, leave her a quivering wreck for hours, and he could also do what he was doing now, and make her climax within seconds.

She'd been without his touch for almost a week now, and felt as taut as a tightly coiled spring. Under his expert ministrations, she felt the tension unwind, and found her release.

As she came around him, his eyes glazed over and he too found his

release, crying her name with a desperation that almost matched what blazed within her heart.

She collapsed on top of him, a boneless, sweaty, mess, and his arms came around her, stroking her back. She buried her face into his neck, enjoying how his scent surrounded her, how his chin rested on top of her head.

“I love you,” he whispered again, as he had every time they’d slept together. It was a heady feeling, the way he constantly reaffirmed his feelings for her, made *sure* she knew she was wanted, valued, accepted. She wished so much that she could deserve it.

“I love you too,” she said, kissing his neck. He began playing with a strand of her hair, and she hummed. “How was your visit to the compound?” she asked. He seemed to be in a good mood, and the thought made her feel relieved. Perhaps the visit hadn’t taken as much of a toll as she’d feared.

“It was... Enlightening, I suppose. I expected it to be a painful experience, at the very least. Nostalgic. But as I walked the paths within, I felt nothing.”

“Nothing?” Sakura echoed, and he nodded, a crooked smile playing about his lips.

“Nothing,” he confirmed. “It wasn’t the same compound I remembered. The structure of the buildings was the same, but it wasn’t a place of life as I remembered it. Or even a place of haunting memories. It was just empty, and sad.”

“Oh,” she replied. That was unexpected indeed.

“I had an idea of sorts. I doubt anyone would want to live on that land so long as the memory of the massacre remains. But to leave it empty would only solidify its identity as a place of death. I am thinking of having the buildings demolished, and having it made into a park. It would be a place of life, of growth, of remembrance for those who have passed but will not be immortalized on the cenotaph. There would be extensive gardens,” he said, and placing a kiss to her hair, went on, “and of course, the highlight of those gardens would be the cherry blossom trees. It would be a beautiful place for hanami in the spring.”

“You’ve really thought this through,” Sakura said.

He nodded. "I met Kakashi-san at the cenotaph yesterday. During our conversation, I realized that there are many in this village who deserve to be remembered, but never will be so long as the cenotaph is the only memorial we have. Especially all the Uchiha who died by my hand. Most of them did not deserve that fate, and this is something I can do to attempt to set things right." He hesitated a moment. "It could also be as we spoke about. A way to honour our Hanako."

Sakura realized that she felt out of her depth. It felt uncharitable. It wasn't as if she *wanted* him to feel tormented and unhappy. It was good that he had hopes, plans for a future. Plans that did not center around her. This was exactly what she'd wanted for him.

But it was just... She was so used to needing to draw him out, to force him to share his feelings. To comforting him, even against his will. Now, especially, when she felt so adrift, she keenly felt the loss of that role.

"Sounds like you've been making friends," she said lightly, hoping the strain in her voice wasn't audible.

"You could say that. I also met Naruto-kun," Itachi replied. "He brought me to Ichiraku's."

Sakura laughed. "Congratulations, I suppose – that means Naruto likes you. Though I wouldn't necessarily say that's a good thing. If his behaviour towards you is anything like it is towards Sasuke, he'll be constantly competing to out-do you."

"I look forward to that," Itachi replied. "It will be a pleasant change, to spar for the sake of growth rather than fighting to the death or to exert supremacy."

She nodded again, not knowing how to respond. He hummed and nuzzled into her hair, and for the first time, Sakura found herself wanting to push him away. *He never asked me for a spar, not outside the genjutsu, where he was training me, she realized. I thought it was because he disliked fighting, but if a spar with Naruto is so pleasant, then it's me, isn't it? He doesn't want to fight me, he thinks I'm weak, he was just trying to make me feel better all those times he told me I was strong –*

Stop, stop, stop, she thought, trying to dismiss those thoughts. They weren't true, it was just her insecurities getting the better of her again. He loved her and respected her. He wanted to plant cherry blossom trees in his garden for her. She just needed to get over this.

“Sakura?” he asked. She looked up at him, hoping none of her turbulent thoughts showed on her face. It probably did, she thought sourly. Just another way in which she was a terrible shinobi. “Is everything alright? You have not said a word.”

She pushed herself into a seating position. Too close, she was too close. It was so ironic. After wishing just that morning for his warmth, she now couldn’t stand it anymore.

“What, so I’m not allowed to be quiet?” she snapped, with more force than she intended. A look of consternation flickered across his face, before his expression closed off, going back to his usual empty expression. She’d hurt him. He hadn’t looked like that around her at all the whole time they’d been in Konoha. She felt a twinge in her chest.

“I apologize if I have given offense,” he said softly. He sat up and reached out, as if to touch her, but seemed to think better of it, and his hand dropped limply to his side.

“No,” she sighed. “You haven’t. It’s just – it’s just me, I guess.”

“Do you wish to speak about it?”

No, she absolutely did not. It had been bad enough talking about her weakness with shishou. She did not want to give Itachi even more reasons to leave her.

He stayed for me. Even though I’m the reason our baby died before it even had a chance.

She owed it to him to at least try. Especially after all the times she’d forced him to talk about his feelings. She would. Just not... then. Not when she was still feeling so raw, as if she’d been chewed up and spat out. And not when he had just found a sense of purpose apart from death. She wouldn’t, couldn’t, drag him down.

“I just need some time, I guess,” she replied. “It’s been a little tough adjusting to life back here.”

“Do you wish for me to leave?”

It was spoken so softly, so tentatively. And even though she’d been wanting that exact thing just a few moments ago, the thought of telling him so – of watching his gentle smile, his accepting nod, following the limits she set no matter how he felt – it *hurt*. And she

didn't really want to be alone. She did want him with her. She just wished all the thoughts swirling around her brain, the screams that she *was not good enough* and *never would be good enough* would stop.

"No!" she cried, and watched his lips twitch. "It's already so hard for us to get some private time together now that we're here. I don't... I don't want you to go."

He smiled fully then, and drew his arms around her again. Sakura allowed herself to relax in his embrace, to focus on the feeling of being loved. Tried to ignore the whispers in her head that this feeling would be ripped away soon, that she should leave *him* before he had the chance to leave *her*.

"Is that so?" he murmured, his lips closing over the shell of her ear. She shivered. Did he want another round?

"Mmhm," she said, forcing herself to sound steady and unaffected. "I think you should stay for breakfast."

"I wish I could," he admitted. "It has been difficult, being apart from you. The apartment I was given is satisfactory, but I miss being with you every night."

"You could just move in," she laughed, and immediately regretted her words. She hoped that he wouldn't take her up on that offer – then he'd quickly realize that all wasn't well as she'd tried to assure him. That she wasn't working in the hospital.

Four weeks, she just had to make it another four weeks.

He sighed. "I would not wish to disrespect your mother in that manner."

"No?" she teased. "And I suppose sneaking in to my room in the middle of the night to have hot sex with me *is* the epitome of respect?"

"It is what I can manage," he responded easily. He looked at her again, with those eyes that always saw too much. He'd been a spy for ten years – he surely *knew* that she was keeping things from him. She felt another twinge of guilt as she recalled all the times that he'd become agitated by her secrecy. She should tell him. She should.

But just... the idea that he might know her weakness. It made her feel sick. It was different with her shishou – she was the one who'd

nurtured Sakura from weakness to strength. Shishou would not cast her aside for that. Itachi, though, had only ever seen her at her best. Even when he'd soothed her through her nightmares, it hadn't made her feel this small. How could she risk showing that to him?

"You would tell me if anything I did displeased you, yes?" he asked.

"It's not you, Itachi, I promise," she replied immediately. "I just, it's just been a difficult day. It'll get better soon. I promise."

He nodded, still looking uncertain, and Sakura hated herself for putting that look on his face. She did not say another word as he pulled her closer and buried his face in her neck.

"The reports you took from Orochimaru were accurate," Karin reported. "She did put up a fight. Quite an intense one. She took the first one down, and fought the second one to near exhaustion, based on the reports we collected from the townspeople. They haven't managed to do anything about the craters she created yet."

"What are the chances she was faking the exhaustion, and got herself captured on purpose?" Sasuke asked, frowning. In the time that his team had been gone, he'd tried his best to consider all the possible angles. He was *done* being led around by the nose – being lied to and deceived. He had to take control of his fate.

"It's unlikely. While we are going off the reports of civilians, we weren't the only ones who stopped by to ask about her. A man whose description matches your brother was there, looking for her things and asking about the fight. A few days after that, a group of Konoha shinobi were too. If she really did allow herself to be taken based on orders from Konoha, there would be no reason for either to ask about her."

Sasuke nodded. Asking Karin to lead the team, with Suigetsu and Juugo to serve as her muscle, had been the right choice. The only stupid thing she'd ever done was to fall for him. He hesitated, before making his decision. She hadn't let him down thus far, and he desperately needed to shore up his blind spots.

"What am I missing, Karin?" he asked. "It doesn't make sense. None of it makes sense."

She frowned, rubbing her forearm. "Sasuke, this is going to sound... Strange. But I think you should be careful of that black and white guy.

His chakra feels wrong. Like malice. It's all twisted up. I've never felt anything that made my skin crawl the way he does."

"Zetsu?" Sasuke asked. That *was* strange. Wasn't he just a spy?

She nodded. "And I don't think you should trust that Madara character either. Most of his chakra is normal, just angry. But there's that same wrongness around here," she said, pointing to her left shoulder, drawing her finger down to her torso.

Sasuke considered. At first, it had just sounded like some sort of intuition. But what she shared now seemed more like some sort of sensor ability.

Just how many abilities have you been hiding from me, Karin?

Belatedly, he realized that she hadn't been hiding it – she'd shared quite freely about it when it became necessary. He just hadn't asked. Hadn't understood his team's limits and resources, had just assumed he knew everything about them based on his prior experience with them.

He looked at Karin, then at Suigetsu, then Juugo. They weren't Team 7, but he shouldn't have expected them to be. They were their own people who, for some reason, had decided to give him their loyalty.

They'd proven themselves worthy of his trust. It was about time he respected that and used them to their fullest potential.

It gave Jiraiya a funny feeling, looking at the ring and knowing it was one that Konan had worn.

Konan, his student. Along with a wielder of the Rinnegan who controlled multiple bodies who could only be Nagato. And the main body he used to show himself sounded like Yahiko's.

That was what had become of his students, then. Two dead, and one lost, a puppet leader of a criminal organization.

It would have almost been better if they'd perished as he'd received word of many years ago. Even so, it wouldn't have changed anything. He still would have made all the same mistakes. Still would have thought himself a poor teacher, kept his distance from his student's child – afraid of loss, afraid that whatever he taught him wouldn't be enough, afraid of the bitter feeling of failure. Waiting for the feeling of

inadequacy and unreadiness to pass until weeks rolled into months into years, and he had essentially abandoned his godson.

It was easy to see the holes in his reasoning in hindsight. Would that he'd seen them beforehand, before he became like the well-meaning idiot he always wrote into his books, who ultimately wrecked everything.

Sighing, he pushed the thoughts aside. There was no use dwelling on his failures now. He had to focus on doing as Tsunade had instructed him, and focus on reverse engineering the seal on Konan's ring. Itachi hadn't known much about how the rings worked, but he'd known that they couldn't be removed, and that they allowed the wearer's location to be tracked.

Most importantly, they allowed the wearers to communicate with each other. If he could isolate that element and reverse it, they could track the ring worn by the one called Pain. The one he suspected was Nagato.

He looked over at Naruto, working so studiously next to him. He never would have thought he would have the patience for anything as intricate and complicated as seal work, but he'd somehow managed to crack the Flying Thunder God jutsu.

If only he hadn't given up so easily, consumed as he'd been by the idea that Nagato, and then Minato, was the child of prophecy The Great Toad Sage had spoken of. If only he'd taken the boy under his wing and raised him as a godfather ought to have.

Better late than never, he sighed privately, and leaned over to see what progress Naruto had made.

The one who called himself Pain watched the flames. Much like humanity, they existed solely to consume and destroy everything they touched.

He'd dreamed once that humanity could be different. That there could be true peace. Those were the dreams of a foolish child. A child who hadn't seen Yahiko and Konan killed by malice and greed.

He straightened as he felt a connection being made to his ring. That could not be possible – there were no surviving members of the Akatsuki left who needed to use the ring. Madara and Zetsu both simply materialized before him when they needed to speak to him.

It was Konan's ring.

Was it possible she was still alive? He sent the Deva Path to check the master ring, and hissed as the information was transmitted to him.

The ring had connected, but it was because the seal had been tampered with. And it was not connected to any body. He hissed as he realized Konan's ring had been *removed from her body*. They had not been satisfied with murdering her – they had *defiled* her remains.

He traced the communication, and found that it led straight to Konoha. Where in all likelihood, Uchiha Itachi had fled like the rat he was.

They would all pay.

Chapter End Notes

The idea of a garden being built in the Uchiha compound was drawn from Annick_La's [The Vow of Flowers](#). Super underrated and an amazing read, and definitely deserves more love - do check it out! It's one of my top favourite ItaSaku works.

The Question

Itachi lay the finishing touches to his set-up. He assessed it, eyeing it for any imperfections. Everything had to be just so.

Here, on top of the Hokage monument, he was going to ask Sakura to marry him.

He fussed with the blanket, making sure it was laid out tidily. The basket was already planted dead-centre, and the flowers – a bouquet of pink primroses and white apricot blooms – were perched atop it. He hoped she would like the symbolism, of eternal love, purity, and faithfulness.

Even as he positioned and re-positioned the bouquet, he knew he was being ridiculous. It was not as if the placement of the flowers would affect whether she said yes. And yet... He found himself feeling uncertain. Especially since she'd lied to him the night before.

She'd told him everything was alright, but it wasn't. Not really. He could only hope that whatever was troubling her, she would tell him about it soon. That she wasn't regretting their relationship. Regretting them.

His mind drifted to the conversation he'd had with the Fifth that morning, and he brutally quashed that train of thought. He'd made a promise to Sakura, and he intended to keep that promise. No matter that he felt he should go. No matter the voice that whispered he was being a coward, that he was hiding behind his promise to Sakura so that he could avoid something difficult.

He sensed Sakura's familiar chakra signature moving up the monument. She was here. He stopped rearranging everything and sat, looking as if he had not a single worry in the world.

On seeing Itachi, she fixed a smile onto her face. He could immediately tell that it wasn't entirely genuine – when she smiled, truly smiled, her entire being lit up with a radiance that warmed those around her. This though, was a simple upward quirk of the lips. There was no life to it.

Coldness seeped into his fingertips, and traversed throughout his body. Was she going to end it?

“Hi,” she said softly, and sat next to him. “This looks really nice, Itachi. Thank you.”

There was a space between them, which had never existed before. Previously, she would have held his hand, or leaned against his shoulder. But now, nothing. Her hands were folded on her lap, as if to shield herself, and Itachi found himself wondering if she realized how her bodily movements and posture betrayed her thoughts.

“Good evening,” he said softly, and placed his arm around her shoulders, wondering if it was the wrong move. She stiffened for an instant before her muscles relaxed, but did not lean into the embrace. His heart sank.

Was it even worth proposing marriage? Her body language screamed that she did not want to be there with him.

An unpleasant sensation passed through him, and it took all his self-control to keep from clenching his fists. She’d entered his life, upended all sense of normalcy, made herself the centre of his universe, upset all his plans. If she cast him aside now, what was he to do? Where would he even go? Was there even any meaning to remaining in Konoha?

Calm, he reminded himself. This was exactly what he’d done at the start of their relationship – he’d constantly taken offense at the smallest action, and allowed bitterness and resentment to fester within. He couldn’t repeat that. Especially now that there was no longer an ever-present danger to keep them attached to each other.

He inhaled sharply as a realization hit him. Could that be it? Were her feelings only the product of dependency?

No. He refused to believe that. They’d been through too much, shared too much. He knew her.

He picked up the bouquet, and passed it to her. “These are for you,” he murmured. He couldn’t bring himself to meet her eyes. He wondered when he’d become such a coward, that the very possibility of seeing a woman’s indifference made him retreat.

“Thank you,” she repeated. “They’re beautiful.”

Silence fell again. “How was your day?” he asked, wildly casting about for a topic. Something, anything, would be better than this painful silence they’d found themselves in. Did they truly not know

how to function as a couple when their lives were no longer in danger? “Did you have a shift at the hospital?”

She seemed to retreat into herself even more, her posture becoming more hunched. “No. No shift today,” she replied. Itachi’s eyes narrowed.

Whatever was bothering her – it had something to do with the hospital, then. He couldn’t deny the sharp stab of relief that went through him, and cursed himself for his selfishness. He would truly prefer for her to be experiencing difficulties with her profession than having a change of heart with regards to him?

He would give her time, he decided. The best thing he could do now would be to give her a sense of normalcy. He opened the basket, and began setting out the dishes.

“There’s rice balls, umeboshi, and of course, tempura,” he said, his lips quirking upward. She’d been constantly asking for it during her time in the hospital, and he’d quickly realized which way her food preferences went.

She began trembling, and then looked up at him with wild eyes. “Is that it then?” she demanded. “Are we back to the hiding and the lies? Are you just going to pretend everything’s okay and normal, and leave me without a word?”

The force of her anger almost drove him back. “What do you mean?”

“Naruto told me that they managed to get a fix on Pain’s location. That he’s still in Ame, and that in all probability, Obito and Sasuke would be there too. Don’t expect me to believe that Shishou didn’t ask you to join the retrieval mission. You’re the obvious first choice,” she spat.

Itachi could have almost laughed with relief. It wasn’t him. And it wasn’t the hospital either, or anything else she loved. It was a simple misunderstanding. One he should have anticipated. It continually slipped his mind that Sakura had a multitude of friends, most of whom would not share his reticence in passing along information.

“Hokage-sama did offer me the mission this morning,” he admitted. “But I turned it down, Sakura. I’m not going anywhere.”

She stared at him, shock clearly written across her features. “What? Why?”

"I made a vow to you," he reminded, pulling her closer. There was no need to allow that space to exist anymore. It was alright, they were alright. He ran a hand down her shoulders. "I almost broke that vow. And our child paid the price for it. I do not repeat mistakes."

"But you still want to go. Don't you?"

"That doesn't matter. I have made my decision. I choose you, and our life together. For me to go after Sasuke yet again would not be in that dream's best interest."

"No," she cried. She wrenched herself out of his grip and got to her feet, pacing. "No. You can't – Don't decide that just for me."

Itachi felt utterly bewildered. After everything... "Are you... asking me to leave?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. Damn it, Itachi! You can't make that decision just because of a promise I forced you to make!" She wrapped her arms around herself, and looked so fragile in that moment.

"You didn't force me to make any promises," he said, making his way over to her, and wrapping his arms around her, laying them atop hers.

"I did, and I don't deserve that, Itachi. I don't deserve you."

His mind worked as if through a haze. He felt as if he'd missed some vital conversation. "Why would you think that way?"

"I – I –"

He continued to hold her, soothing her with his touches as best as he could. He did not understand what was happening at all. The only thing he knew for certain was that she did not despise him. She'd been upset before, to be sure, but he couldn't recall a time where she wasn't entirely certain of herself and her beliefs. For her to call herself undeserving was shocking, especially considering who he was, and what he'd done.

"Sakura," he murmured. "It pains me to hear you speak of yourself in this manner. You saved me from myself. You gave me the hope to live again. How could you say you are undeserving? And of me, of all people?"

She turned in his arms, and clutched at his shirt. "Because I'm not that Sakura anymore!" she screamed, and buried her head in his shirt, her

body shaking with the force of the heaving sobs that left her. Itachi maneuvered them back into a seating position, desperately pressing kisses to her head, running his hands down her body, hoping to calm her in any way possible.

“I’m not – I’m not strong anymore. I’m not decisive, I’m not observant, I’m not – not any of the things I was when I was captured. You kept saying I was strong, and how much you admired me and respected me, but Itachi – I’m weak now. I’m so weak. I can’t stop thinking back to all the things that happened when we were still there. I dream of it, and I wake up screaming. I’ve been forced on leave from the hospital for four weeks because an ANBU team came in with serious injuries, and one of them looked a bit like you, had injuries like yours, and I froze. I knew exactly what I needed to do for him, and I froze. I was useless.”

“Sakura –”

“And when you told me about how you’d be happy to spar with Naruto, I got so upset because you didn’t ask me to spar with you, and I thought it was because I was too weak to give you a proper challenge. And on top of all that, today I found out that they reverse-engineered the seal on Konan’s ring to track down Pain, and they didn’t even ask me to help with it. I’m supposed to be the expert on seals, only Jiraiya-sama’s supposed to know more than me. But they asked Naruto to help, and not me. They know I’m useless too.”

His heart shattered at the pain in her voice. “That’s not true,” he said fiercely. He gripped her chin, and tilted her face upwards so her eyes met his. She needed to feel the truth and certainty behind his words. “You may feel like you are weak now. But you have gone through things nobody should have been forced to endure. Your mind has suffered.”

“But you protected me –”

He shook his head. “You know that doesn’t detract from the fear you felt. And integrating Brainwashed Sakura back into yourself would only have worsened the effects.”

She’d opened her mouth as if to rebut him, but closed it again at his second sentence. “What do you mean?” she asked finally, and Itachi felt incredibly relieved at how her voice was softer, now. Calmer.

“You created those memories. Of being violated and abused. And even though you dismissed her, you still remember what happened when

she was in control. Yes?”

“So those memories wouldn’t have gone away,” she said slowly. “They’d still be there. As if I’d experienced those things for myself.”

He nodded. “At one point, I suspected that the face you showed me was a false persona as well, and that when you judged I was weak, you would strike, and kill me before I had a chance to fulfil my plans for Sasuke.” Her eyes widened.

“I quickly dismissed those suspicions,” he assured her. “I realized that I wanted to trust you. And that at your core, the personas were still you. But during that period of suspicion, I spent a lot of time observing and speculating on the nature of the personas.”

“That’s why you asked me all those questions when we went on that date in Ame,” she realized. “You were trying to see... how much the memories were shared? Or the sentiments? That’s why you focused on things like why I chose to study seals, my likes and dislikes. There would have been no reason for me to ensure Brainwashed Sakura had that knowledge.”

He smiled, and kissed her forehead. “And you say you are not observant anymore? You are still very much the Sakura I fell for. But yes. That was my purpose. I realized that the personas weren’t separate people. It was as you first said – you essentially cast a genjutsu on yourself to make yourself believe your life went differently. And that in itself would have wounded your mind. But you continued to swap between the personas, and to integrate and hold on to the experiences Brainwashed Sakura lived. Is it any wonder that your mind also retained the effects of the genjutsu that created her? Began to believe those events for truth?”

She threw her arms around him then, and began weeping again. But these tears were softer, calmer. “Thank you, Itachi,” she said. “For helping me understand what’s been happening. I thought I was going insane. I’ve just been so afraid all the time. Especially of what you would think of me, and I kept – I kept thinking that if I couldn’t manage myself, if I said or did the wrong thing, you’d leave me.”

He gently ran his thumb along her cheeks, wiping her tears. With a muttered jutsu, he wet one of the napkins he’d brought and pressed it to the edges of her eyes. “Even if you weren’t experiencing the post-effects from the persona switching,” he said, his voice low, “even if all these thoughts and feelings had no other explanation apart from the

trauma of your captivity, that would not change how I feel for you.”

She snorted. “You say that now, but I know that nobody finds a crybaby attractive.”

“Do you remember the first time I kissed you?”

She laughed – there was a note of strain to it, but thankfully, she wasn’t entirely faking the emotion. She was feeling better. “How could I forget? You were so mean to me, and then you suddenly kissed me out of nowhere. I was so confused.” She flushed. “And I couldn’t stop thinking about what a great kisser you were. That messed me up for a while, alright – thinking I was attracted to some heartless psychopath.”

He smiled. He would have dearly loved to follow that tangent, to tease her a little and watch her blush deepen further. It was a sight he always enjoyed. But he forced himself to stay focused. “You wept,” he said softly. “It was the first time in many years that anyone had shown me how they truly felt. And for that to come from someone who considered me an enemy no less... It drew me to you. I had so many inappropriate urges – to kiss your tears away, to hold you. To make love to you, make you smile, make sure you never had a reason to shed another tear.”

Her gaze went downwards, and he noticed that her cheeks were flushing anyway, even though that hadn’t been his intent. He caressed them. She was so beautiful, in every form. Whether she was laughing, scowling, screaming, or weeping – she always took his breath away. “And I was so bewildered by my attraction to you. But then I realized – it was your vulnerability that captivated me. That was the strength you held, which I lacked. The strength to be true, to allow the chinks in your armour to be visible to the world. The strength to forgive and accept your own self, flaws and all. The strength to find a way to pursue your dreams anyway. It does not matter to me what state you are in. Even when you are weeping, even when you feel weak, I still want you.”

“Oh, Itachi,” she choked out. “I’m so sorry for doubting you. You – you had such lovely thoughts about me, and I just kept on thinking that you would be disgusted by me.”

He brushed his lips against hers. “You never need to apologize. I love you, flaws and all. As you somehow seem to love and accept me.” A thought occurred to him then. “You said you’ve been placed on

mandatory leave from the hospital. Is Hokage-sama aware that you have been suffering?"

Sakura nodded. "She suggested I see a Yamanaka mind healer. But I... I wasn't sure if it was necessary. I mean, you survived worse. And you're fine. I didn't want to be any lesser than you."

He smiled wryly, and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Sakura, I grew up as the heir to the Uchiha clan. Whatever I experienced in the Akatsuki – hidden agendas, deception – was rather similar to my upbringing. Of course, I did not believe my immediate family would attempt to murder me. But I did not think my fellow Akatsuki members would attempt to kill me either, not as long as Obito still had a purpose for me. I was prepared for that life in a way that you never were. And more importantly, I was there by my own choice. You were dragged there, and had to survive the best that you could. Our situations are not the same, and should not be compared."

She nodded, and Itachi picked up a rice ball to hand to her. She chewed, leaning against him, and he felt as if he could breathe easily again. As they both took turns to feed each other, he felt sweet contentment rise within him again, finally given room to exist once his worries were swept aside. He began gathering up the strands of courage within him again, to ask the question he wished to.

"Itachi," Sakura suddenly said, breaking the comfortable silence they'd fallen into. "Are you really not going on the mission?"

"Yes. I am not."

"You could. I won't stop you. Just... promise you'll do your best to come back to me. Just don't give up on life."

"I can't," he said hoarsely, before realizing how that would sound. But before he could explain what he meant, she took his hand in hers, squeezing it. "It's not just the promise that's stopping you, is it?"

Trust Sakura to see right to the heart of the matter, even when she wasn't feeling her best. He took a deep breath. He would be honest. She had the courage to be upfront about her feelings, to admit them not only to herself, but also to him. How could he do any differently? He had to give voice to the thoughts, thoughts he hadn't dared recognize as truth.

"I'm afraid," he said. "I love my brother. I lived in torment for years, all for the hope that he would thrive as I could not. But he killed our

child. And he almost killed you.” He felt the tears well up in his eyes, but made no move to stop them. Sakura would accept his tears as no one else would, as no one else could.

“I am afraid that when I see him, I will forget the love I hold for him. That I will kill him for what he has taken from me. Because as much as I deserved that pain, you did not. Our Hanako did not. I am afraid that I will not know how to forgive him. That I will forget that I am the one who must seek forgiveness from him.”

She continued to lightly squeeze his hand, rubbing her thumb reassuringly over his palm. “I believe in you,” she said. “I wish I could give you some advice on what to do when you face him, but I really don’t have anything. All I can tell you is that I believe in you, that you will figure out what to do, and that I think you do need to do this. You do need to talk to him. If not, you’ll carry not just this fear, but your regrets with you for the rest of your life. And think of it this way – out of everyone Konoha could send, except Naruto, you’re the only one who has any desire to keep him alive to begin with.”

“Come with me,” he said almost impulsively. “I would feel better about my ability to get through this if I knew that I could count on you to have my back.”

She smiled sadly, and shook her head. “I can’t, Itachi,” she said. “I want to. I feel like going back there of my own free will would help me face the demons in my head, even though the very thought of going anywhere near Ame scares the crap out of me. But when Shishou told me about my mandatory leave from the hospital, she also made it clear that I’m off missions.”

He instantly felt terrible. In that moment, he’d allowed it to slip his mind that she was still suffering from the residual effects of her trauma, and he’d focused entirely on himself and his needs –

“Hey,” she said, patting his cheek. “I know that look. Stop beating yourself up. You’re allowed to put yourself before me. Before anyone else.”

“I could say the same to you.”

She laughed, and it was the most beautiful sound he’d heard that day. It had all her warmth and light and life in it. “You sound so sulky!” she gasped. “Itachi, who knew you could be so adorable!”

It was almost as if a glow surrounded her as her chest heaved, and she

clutched her stomach. It hadn't been that funny, but it reminded him yet again of how she could find joy in even the smallest things, in even the darkest moments. He knew, in that moment, that no matter her answer, he could not stop himself from asking.

He took her palms in his, and knelt on both knees. Her laughter cut off, and she looked at him with surprise. He tilted his head forward, pressing his forehead to her palms and exposing the back of his neck. He would never have dared to do so with anyone else. But with her, he was safe.

"You are the only one for me. I'll go. I'll deal with Sasuke, and I will return to you. When I'm back, marry me," he said, and he could have kicked himself. After all he'd said about making sure it was romantic, this was how he did it? Without a proper declaration, the flowers he'd so carefully picked out lying neglected by the side?

And he hadn't even asked. He'd outright demanded. He winced at himself, but kept his composure. It was done, and he could not take the words back. He would await her answer.

"Itachi," she whispered, her voice choked up. "Yes. Oh, yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

He looked up at her, saw her eyes wet with tears, as he knew his own were. Getting to his feet, he pulled out the betrothal necklace he'd purchased – a velvet black cord, infused with his chakra – and tied it around her neck. It would be a placeholder until they had a ceremony, where they would exchange the necklaces that they would wear for as long as their marriage lasted. The one she would gift to him, he knew, would never leave his neck.

She stretched out her hand, and he passed her the other one he had obtained. It was more traditional for the necklaces to be the same colour, but he wanted to make it clear who he was promised to. He'd purchased one in the exact shade of pink of her hair. Her hand covered her mouth, before she infused the cord with her own chakra.

He knelt again, so she would not have to strain to reach. She knotted the cord around his neck. Once that was done, she sank to her knees as well, and pulled him into an embrace.

It didn't matter that none of it had gone as he'd planned. He loved her, and she loved him. They were promised to each other. His senses felt the comforting warmth of her gentle chakra around his neck, and it fortified him. He had absolutely no idea what he would do about

Sasuke. But what he did know was that he would find a way. With the reminder of her love and strength around his neck, he always would.

I Will Love You Always

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year everyone!

Also, yes that's right folks. This story now has a chapter final count. I have Chapter 35 written (because I needed to write it and 34 together to make sure it flowed coherently haha) and I just have Chapter 36 and an epilogue left. The end is so near and I can't believe it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On the outskirts of Ame, Kakashi-senpai had them check all their items and equipment.

“I’m going to leave one of the Hiraishin kunai here,” Naruto-kun suddenly decided. “In case we need to make a quick retreat.”

Itachi nodded, satisfied. It seemed that an old dog *could* be taught new tricks, and Uzumaki had grown by leaps and bounds since childhood, learning to act with caution and prepare backup plans, rather than plunging headfirst into whatever scenario confronted him.

He checked his own supplies as well. His kunai and shuriken were sharpened to razor points, and he had plenty of Sakura’s healing seals. He’d also prepared some for his teammates whenever it had been his turn to take watch, but the ones made by Sakura’s hand he kept for himself. His hand drifted to the pink cord around his throat, where Sakura’s chakra hummed.

His fingers tightened around the cord. He’d do his best to bring Sasuke back, but Sakura was his highest priority now. He *would* return home to her.

Obito sat in his chambers like a cornered rat.

He hadn’t realized just how much he’d depended on Kamui before he’d lost it. Damn Konoha anyway, damn Kakashi for not realizing that he was doing this for *them*. For Rin. The fool had decided that he needed to stop Obito at any cost, even allowing outsiders to understand how the Sharingan worked.

He'd allowed them to post *guards* inside the Kamui dimension. All for the purpose of confronting Obito whenever he dared enter the dimension. He cursed the day that Kakashi had discovered his true identity. No more could he hide behind the mantle of Madara. No more did he avoid conflict by the sheer weight of Madara's name – every two-penny shinobi now thought they could take him on.

Half of Zetsu's body emerged from the walls. "Konoha has sent a team," he reported. "They're on the outskirts of the city."

He felt a growl reverberate from his chest. Normally, he'd simply have changed locations – a strategy that was now lost to him. The guards they had posted weren't as skilled as him, but they could overwhelm him with numbers. And they'd set traps around the place too. He couldn't even use his favourite method of stashing kunai and shuriken within the dimension, to unleash them in a barrage later on – the guards within would simply destroy or displace them.

There was no choice – he had to fight his way out of this with only traditional shinobi tactics. He cursed their timing as well – they *had* to arrive just when that fool Nagato had decided to abandon everything they'd worked for, to go off on some hare-brained scheme of revenge.

"Who's on the team?" he asked.

"Hatake Kakashi. Jiraiya. Uchiha Itachi. Uzumaki Naruto."

Obito cursed yet again. Konoha had kept their jinchuuriki in hiding for *years*, and they'd gotten the other villages to follow suit. And now, at the point where he sorely wished they'd continue hiding their jinchuuriki, they began sending the Uzumaki brat everywhere.

It was enough to make him want to tear his hair out. He'd just have to deal with this. Somehow.

"Summon Sasuke," he ordered Zetsu.

He hadn't intended for Sasuke, or his team of misfits, to join the battle. There was too much of a risk that he hadn't successfully poisoned Sasuke's mind, that Itachi would be able to persuade Sasuke to stand down. But he had no choice. This way, he would be able to remove at least Itachi from the battle. Now that his ability to use Kamui was hampered, he would surely lose against Itachi, and that was an outcome that had to be avoided.

Everything had been going so *well*, and now it was all falling apart

around him.

The thought of just giving up entered his mind, and he strengthened himself by thinking of a young girl with nut brown hair and the sweetest eyes he'd ever beheld.

Rin. This is all for Rin.

If he wanted any chance in hell of looking into her warm, loving eyes again, he had to make this work. He would. Or he'd die trying.

Sasuke tried to study Madara without being too obvious that was what he was doing. He hoped the man wouldn't be too suspicious that Sasuke had his Sharingan activated.

He tried to see the roiling mass of chakra that Karin had sensed, which she'd said was so similar to the way Orochimaru's chakra overtook his when the curse mark activated and spread.

However, the Sharingan was not the Byakugan – he could sense the amount of chakra Obito had, but not its nature or distribution.

“You'll be at the skyscraper,” Obito said curtly. “The likelihood that Itachi will seek you out to complete his orders – to bring your Sharingan back to Konoha, with or without you attached to those eyes – is high. He is a master of manipulation, and his abilities with genjutsu will only enhance that. You must be on your guard.”

Sasuke nodded, his mind still whirring at top speed. If Zetsu's chakra infected Madara the way Orochimaru's infected his, did it mean Zetsu controlled Madara?

“Where do you want my team?” he asked. “And how will Zetsu be deployed?”

Madara looked over at him, his lone eye assessing Sasuke in an almost eerie fashion. Had he given himself away? He'd asked about his team to mask the fact that he'd wanted to prod more into Zetsu's movements.

“Send Juugo to the southern gates,” he said finally. “And Suigetsu and Karin to the western ones. Knowing Kakashi, he'll probably have his team enter in a pincer formation.”

Knowing Kakashi? There was absolutely no reason for Madara to be

familiar with his tactics, nor for him to address the man so informally. Something was going on.

“And Zetsu?” Sasuke prompted again. “Should I require aid, it will be helpful to know where I can expect to find him.” It was as good an explanation as he could come up with as to why he needed to know the strange man’s movements, inadequate though it was.

“Zetsu doesn’t have combat capabilities,” Madara said curtly. “Not against ninja of this calibre, anyhow. He will serve as our eyes and ears, and relay messages as necessary. Do not rely on him for aid.”

He didn’t have combat capabilities? That was good to know, although he didn’t have much more information on whether Zetsu controlled Madara or not. What had he been thinking, anyway? Madara wouldn’t spill his deepest secrets to him just because he’d *asked*.

He needed to speak with Itachi, he realized. Oh, he was still unbelievably angry with him – for killing their family, for torturing him twice, for *lying* to him about everything. For making him shape his life around a goal that was ultimately meaningless. But he was in over his head, and if there was one thing the past weeks had taught him, it was that he needed to acknowledge his limitations.

“His chakra was troubled and anxious. But it was still warm. Whatever it is, whatever he did, I don’t think Itachi’s a bad guy.” That was what Karin had said. He’d wondered about his own chakra, but refrained from asking. He didn’t really want to know for sure that he was the scum Kakashi had always talked about – the ones that abandoned their comrades.

A wry smile tugged at his lips as he considered how he needed Itachi’s knowledge and experience to understand what was going on. Ten years had passed, but he still needed his aniki. He held on to the burgeoning hope Karin’s words had given him – if his brother’s chakra was warm, then surely, Itachi might actually give a shit about him? Maybe he hadn’t just pretended to be a caring older brother, as he’d said on that horrible night?

Once Madara turned away, he quickly signalled Karin, Juugo, and Suigetsu. *Do not engage with Konoha. Do not surrender either. Not enemies, but not friends.*

He didn’t know exactly what was going on. But he’d been far too rash, and he didn’t want to repeat his mistakes – of acting without knowing what was going on. An image of Itachi cradling Sakura’s limp form

came to mind, and he shoved it down.

He made his way to the spot Obito had indicated – the very same place he'd given his team instructions to begin investigating the circumstances behind Sakura's capture. Standing there, on the top of the skyscraper, he stretched his chakra sense out as far as it would go, searching for that elusive chakra signature he'd known since childhood. That signature had meant warmth, and love – it had meant his big brother was home.

As he searched with little result, the fear intruded again. What if Karin was wrong? What if Obito had told the entire truth after all? Or worse, what if everything he'd said had been lies? What if Itachi truly had been incapable of caring for anything, for anyone? Would he even seek Sasuke out, as Obito seemed to think he would?

He decided that he wasn't going to take any chances. Taking a deep breath, he released a blast of Amaterasu, incinerating an entire building nearby after he'd ensured it was empty.

There. If that didn't get Itachi's attention, he had no idea what would.

Itachi inhaled sharply as he felt the familiar chakra flare in a highly distinctive pattern.

He activated the Mangekyō and scanned his surroundings. Sure enough, he could see the characteristic black flames of Amaterasu.

His chest tightened. *Sasuke.*

He immediately stepped in the direction of the chakra signature, but Kakashi threw an arm out to block his path. "It could be a trap," he warned. "Probably is. If Sasuke's flaring his chakra that way, they probably already know we're here, and they're trying to draw us away."

"Or Sasuke could be fighting for his *life*," Itachi snarled. "Senpai, you're the one who taught me not to abandon my comrades. You can't tell me to ignore his need. Not again."

"You've known Obito more recently than I," Kakashi said, a single dark eye fixed on Itachi. "You would know for yourself if he would really turn on Sasuke while he still had some use to him. *Think*, Itachi! We haven't sensed any other chakra flares. Nor have there been any visual signs that would indicate a battle. Do not allow yourself to

become reckless.”

Itachi hesitated, his hand again moving to the cord around his neck. *Tell me what to do, Sakura*, he begged silently. He'd promised he would not play fast and loose with his life, that he would do his best to return home to her.

But what if Sasuke *did* need him? What if Obito had managed to find a way to suppress his chakra so that he couldn't fire off another attack? Itachi didn't think he could live with himself if he abandoned his brother *again*. Sitting there in that clearing, knowing he'd failed his brother, knowing that the parts of Sasuke's heart that were still left uncorrupted would be poisoned by Obito, he'd felt so impotent. He never wanted to repeat that sensation.

He heard the tell-tale poof of the summoning jutsu behind him. Turning, he saw Naruto-kun holding out a small toad to him – the very same one he'd spotted outside Kasaki, right before they'd been ambushed.

“Kosuke's a messenger toad,” Naruto-kun said soberly. The brightly coloured toad hopped onto Itachi's shoulder, and Naruto-kun also passed him an inscribed kunai. “I still don't believe you were framed. But you're the one who messed the bastard up. As much as I wanted it to be me who would bring him back, I think you're the one who can actually put him back together. If you need to retreat, let Kosuke know. I'll reverse summon you. And if you need backup, tell him too – that kunai will let me come to you.”

Itachi looked to Kakashi – after all, he was the captain of this squad. Kakashi nodded and Itachi briefly clasped Naruto-kun's hand, hoping the squeeze of his fingers conveyed the gratitude he found difficult to speak.

I'm coming, Sasuke, he thought as he turned and ran in the direction of the chakra flare.

Kakashi decided not to wait for Itachi – they'd head straight in to look for Pain and Tobi. Naruto mastering the Flying Thunder God jutsu was an absolute godsend. It meant they didn't need to worry about being too late to make it to aid Itachi, if it became necessary.

Naruto created clones to search the rest of Ame, while they made their way into a nondescript building – one that Itachi had identified for them as Akatsuki's stronghold. On Kakashi's left, there was Jiraiya-

sama, the red streaks of his Sage Mode smeared across his face, and on his right, there was Naruto, with the golden glow that was the chakra the Kyuubi – Naruto had said his name was Kurama – was feeding to him.

And in between them there's me – a normal human with a superhuman upgrade, he thought. It felt almost strange that he was the one captaining the mission when everyone else on it was far more powerful than him, but he supposed it made sense. After all, he was the most capable of being objective. As objective as he could be anyway, when it was Obito he was up against. His heart twisted viciously yet again at the thought of facing his former friend once more.

Part of him wished he could assign Naruto or Jiraiya-sama to confront Obito instead, even as he knew it wouldn't make sense. His abilities would be most capable of nullifying Obito's, while the powerhouses that were Naruto and Jiraiya-sama would be needed to deal with Pain. Itachi only knew that he controlled various bodies and possessed the Rinnegan – he hadn't known anything about how many bodies there were, or what their abilities were. For all they knew, Pain could have an entire army of corpses at his disposal.

He'd have appreciated having Itachi at his back for the confrontation against Obito. But Sasuke needed him more. Kakashi could handle Obito. He would find it in himself to eliminate him. Somehow. With everything Obito had already done, he was far too dangerous to leave alive.

They exited the tunnel and entered the base, checking every possible corner. After he'd disabled what felt like hundreds of tripwires, exploding tags, and nets, they finally found Obito, calmly seated in front of a fireplace in an otherwise barren room.

"Took you long enough," Obito said, his lip curling. "I thought between the two of us, I was the late one, Kakashi."

His heart pounded at how casually Obito referred to their shared past. He could feel the sweaty sheen of his palms – would he even be able to wield kunai and shuriken in this state? Could he truly take on Obito?

"Don't let him get in your head, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto snarled. "You promised you'd never let your comrades die! Don't let me down now! Don't let the bastard and his brother down!"

Yes, that promise. Made so many years ago, in an entirely different battle against an entirely different missing-nin, one he'd had no attachment to. But it still applied in this situation.

His head jerked in a nod. "I'm still here, Naruto. Don't worry." He tapped his fingers on his thigh in their pre-arranged signal, and Naruto and Jiraiya-sama took off, leaving just the two of them. The remnants of the Team 7 of their time. Obito didn't try to stop them from leaving – he knew he was no match. Not for all three of them together.

"You won't let your comrades die, huh? Is that what you told Rin before you shoved your Chidori into her heart?" Obito asked quietly, as the two men circled each other, looking for an opening.

Don't let him get in your head. "Rin sacrificed herself for the good of the village. Because she knew she wouldn't be able to control the Sanbi that had been sealed within her. What are *you* doing, Obito? Sabotaging the very village Rin gave her life to protect?"

"You don't deserve to speak her name!" Obito roared, launching a barrage of kunai at him. Kakashi dodged the ones he could, and sliced through the ones he couldn't with the Chidori. *I have to avoid doing that – there's a limit to how many of those I can fire off in a day.* "Not when you stand in my way, when you refuse to even listen. I'm doing all of this for *Rin!*"

"How does capturing the jinchuuriki do anything at all for Rin?"

"I'm going to create a new world, Kakashi! A world where no one has to suffer. Even the jinchuurikis' deaths won't matter. They'll be happy there too. And we can see everyone we've ever lost again. Rin. Minato-sensei. Your *father*, Kakashi!"

Don't let him get in your head, Kakashi repeated silently to himself. Yet, the words no longer carried the force of Naruto's anger – they were pitiful things, struggling to remain in his mind under the weight of his wants.

"How?" Kakashi asked.

Sasuke was *fine*. He was standing on the top of the skyscraper alone. The same skyscraper where Itachi had come to seek peace, the same skyscraper where he'd finally decided to choose to trust rather than doubt.

There was a certain poetry to it, really. As if he was coming full circle.

Sasuke whipped around to face him, Sharingan activated. All along, Itachi had been unsure how he'd feel when he finally met him. What he'd say and do.

Now, looking into his little brother's blazing eyes, the answer became clear. Nothing had changed in ten years – Sasuke was still the same boy, immature and self-centered, unaware of how his actions affected others, seeking his big brother's attention and approval.

He was still the little brother Itachi had loved with all his heart, and was ready to sacrifice everything for.

He knew what he needed to say to find peace with himself and his conscience. But he just didn't know where to start, or how to say it.

As he cast about for the right words, Sasuke took a step closer to him. "Nii-san," he whispered, and Itachi felt tears spring to his eyes. He'd never thought he'd hear those words pass Sasuke's lips ever again.

Sasuke's eyes shifted into the Mangekyō, and he activated a genjutsu. Itachi immediately understood what Sakura had meant – it was a good attempt at illusion, to be sure. Sasuke was feeding an excess of chakra into it, and the visual details were perfect – he could have almost believed they really were back in Training Ground 36, where Itachi had liked to train, except for the utter lack of scent or sound and the absence of the Land of Fire's smothering humidity.

There were too many weak spots in his genjutsu, and Itachi could have easily dismissed it. Still, he waited. Clearly, Sasuke had something he wanted to show him.

There was a long pause as the two simply watched each other. Waiting for the other to be the one to speak first. The melodrama and rage of their previous encounter had faded with the knowledge of its pointlessness, and all that was left was the wary gaze of two entirely different brands of lethality.

"Is it true?" Sasuke finally asked, breaking the silence. "Is whatever Madara said true? Did you kill them on orders from Konoha?"

"He's not Madara," Itachi replied. "His real name is Obito, and he's been masquerading –"

"That's not what fucking matters!" Sasuke roared. "Damn it, Itachi! I

ask you about our *family*, and you go on about Madara or Obito or whoever the fuck he is?”

Itachi swallowed. “Forgive me, Sasuke. These are truths I thought I would take to my grave. It is difficult for me.”

“And you think it’s been a fucking walk in the park for me? Just answer the question, Itachi! Did you, or did you not, kill our clan on Konoha’s orders?”

“It wasn’t that simple,” Itachi sighed.

“A yes, then,” Sasuke cut in before Itachi could begin explaining himself. “So let me get this straight – Konoha tells you to kill our clan, and you nod your head and do it. And then you decide that it was okay to lie to me, but somehow Sakura shows up and you get all cozy with her? Start a *family* with her? And you even returned to Konoha for her? Damn it, Itachi – why wasn’t *I* worth returning for? Why wasn’t *I* worth telling the truth to? Why – ” his voice broke, but he went on, “why did you make me see all those things? Why would you say to me that you only pretended to care about me? Unless that was the truth.”

Itachi dropped his guard. He’d already realized before that deceit and manipulation brought nothing good. And now, seeing Sasuke’s pain only drove that home. He shouldn’t have to hide from his brother. He never should have.

“I will tell you everything, if you are willing to listen. No more lies, no more deflections. The whole truth. I promise.”

Sasuke’s head jerked in a nod. Itachi disabled his genjutsu, and activated his own. There was no better way than to show him.

“Haven’t you been suffering all this time, Kakashi?” Obito whispered. “Spending your entire life at the cenotaph, mourning Rin and I. It’s enough. Let me take your pain away. Let me help you heal the hurt.”

“No,” Kakashi said. He was on his knees, staring at the floor, his vision blurred by tears, as Obito loomed over him, offering him a salvation that seemed so wrong, even though he couldn’t articulate *why*. He just knew it wasn’t right, that he couldn’t take that redemption –

He stopped short, realizing. Obito wasn’t offering him redemption. He was telling him to escape. To run from his sins, as a child who breaks

a household item would hide from his parents.

He could see a vision of Rin and Obito, the children he'd loved, standing beside him. Hands outstretched to him.

"Take it, Kakashi," Obito whispered. "Take our hands. It will be as if it never happened."

"No," Kakashi repeated, with more conviction. "You – if it never happened, you reduce your sacrifice to nothing. You reduce *Rin's* sacrifice to nothing. You reduce my father's suffering. You dishonour them all, Obito!"

He got to his feet, and the lightning blade finally emerged in his hands, crackling with energy. The words he and Itachi had exchanged at the cenotaph returned to him – that there was meaning to honouring the ones they'd known. That they would remember all shinobi, regardless of whether they were judged good or bad. He remembered the plans Itachi had told him about one quiet night on their journey to Ame, as they'd exchanged their shifts. Of his resolve to create a memorial garden, to honour all the fallen, regardless of what they'd done or how they'd lived. *They all deserved to be mourned.*

"If I take your offer," he said, voice hoarse with the attempt to hold back his grief, "I'd be creating another version of you and Rin. It would be spitting on who you were, what you meant to me, how you changed me. I wouldn't love *you*, Obito – I'd love a version of you that I made up in my head."

He stared into Obito's eyes, willing him to understand. But he remained unmoved, and Kakashi resigned himself. He was no Naruto. His words... they simply weren't enough. All he could do was kill his friends.

He raced towards Obito, lightning crackling in his fist. And stopped short just before he shoved his hand through his chest.

He still couldn't do it. Even knowing what Obito had already done and what he planned to do, he couldn't bring himself to kill someone who, in spite of everything, he still considered a friend.

"You are weak," Obito spat. "You've decided I'm an enemy, and you still can't bring yourself to kill me? You spoke so much about the Obito you used to know – what happened to the Kakashi I used to know? The one who'd follow the rules and complete the mission?"

“He grew up,” Kakashi said, extinguishing the lightning blade, realizing the truth of his words even as he spoke them. “He learned that caring isn’t a weakness. That caring can lead you to find a middle ground between following the rules and abandoning your comrades. That you accept your mistakes, and *do better* the next time.”

Obito lunged towards him, snarling, and Kakashi again activated a lightning jutsu – only this time, he fed less power into it. He struck Obito on the wrist, exactly where he knew one of his nerves were, and stepped back as Obito was paralyzed by the current.

He covered Obito’s eye, preventing him from using his Sharingan, and trussed him up with chakra-enhanced ropes. It was a risk, taking him prisoner rather than eliminating him. But if there was even a chance that they could eventually get through to Obito, to change him, then that was a chance Kakashi was more than willing to take.

“It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, Obito,” he said to his friend’s still body. “I still have hope you can redeem yourself. I somehow managed to change, didn’t I? I forgive you, and I will love you always.”

“Pain isn’t even *in* Ame!” Naruto yelled. “There was this weird watery guy at the Western gate, he said Pain already left days ago!”

“What?” Jiraiya asked, horrified. But Itachi had told them that Nagato *never* left Ame.

That was before Konan’s death.

A chilling realization swept through him. When they’d activated Konan’s ring to track Nagato... Yes, it could very well have alerted him. And he would have gone looking for the source of the signal.

Konoha.

“Naruto, you have to activate your Flying Thunder God jutsu,” Jiraiya said. “He must have gone to Konoha. We have to go too.”

“But we can’t just leave Kakashi-sensei and Itachi behind!” Naruto argued. He paused, considering. “I’ll leave clones behind to go check on them, let them know we’ve headed back. Itachi already has one of my kunai. I’ll give another one to Kakashi-sensei. If the clone disappears, I’ll know they’re in trouble – “

“And then what?” Jiraiya demanded. He didn’t like the idea of leaving

his comrades behind any more than Naruto did, but he had to trust that if anyone could handle themselves, it would be Hatake Kakashi and Uchiha Itachi.

“What if you’re in the middle of the fight against Pain, and you need chakra which you don’t have because you’re sustaining your clones? Or would you leave the fight against him to go support them? We always knew this was a risk. And it’s one we’re going to have to live with.”

Naruto’s anguish was written all over his face, clear as day. He nodded his head. “I’m still sending a clone to tell them we’ve gone,” he said firmly. As Jiraiya opened his mouth to object, Naruto raised a hand. “I know. I’ll make sure they’re careful. But I won’t have them risking their lives, sticking around to look for us.”

Jiraiya closed his mouth, and nodded. There was no arguing with that resolve. Naruto truly would make an excellent Hokage one day.

Sasuke crumpled to the ground, tears streaming. Itachi hesitated with an arm outstretched, not knowing whether the touch would be welcomed.

Eventually, Sasuke looked up at him and moved away, taking the decision out of his hands.

“Sasuke?” he asked tentatively. He hadn’t held back. He’d shown him everything – the fomenting discord among the Uchiha, the plans to unleash the Kyuubi on the populace, the Third’s attempts at diplomacy, Shisui’s failed attempt to stop the coup and his subsequent death, Itachi’s own orders from Danzō, and that fateful night that he’d carried out the massacre. He’d considered showing him more, but he’d stopped there. Sasuke had only asked for the truth behind the massacre, and to show him anything more would be to try to evoke his sympathy for what Itachi had done. He would not manipulate him that way.

“I hate you,” Sasuke spat. Itachi’s heart sank, and he pulled his arm back. “You sold our family out. You could have kept quiet, but you *sold them out!*”

The instinct in him to explain himself was strong, but he held it back. Sasuke had the truth now. What he would do with it was his own choice.

“And you... You tortured me. Lied to me. *Why*, Itachi? I still don’t understand. Why would you tell me to come find you with eyes like yours?”

“Because you are right,” Itachi replied. “Because I should have found a way that did not involve killing our clan. Because I did betray them, and I did kill them. I thought that I deserved to be punished for all I had done, and I wanted to be judged by an Uchiha. And you deserved the peace of knowing your clan was avenged.”

Sasuke’s body shook again, and it took Itachi a moment to realize that he was laughing – a bitter thing, with a hard edge to it. “For a genius, you sure are a fucking idiot, huh? *Nothing* of what I’ve felt in the past ten years was peace! I kept thinking, if I could have been so wrong about my brother, what else could I have been wrong about? Could I even trust my own judgement?”

“I know that now. Sakura helped me come to my senses. She told me I had to give you the truth, and that I couldn’t manipulate you into living a happy life.”

Silence fell for a moment, until Sasuke’s shoulders eventually sagged, and all the fight appeared to go out of him. “Sakura, huh?” Sasuke asked, his voice heavy with implication that Itachi couldn’t decipher. His eyes were fixed on the pink cord around Itachi’s neck. “Why her, anyway?”

Itachi sighed. “I initially took her under my protection for your sake,” he admitted, and couldn’t deny a stab of satisfaction at how Sasuke’s eyes widened. “I knew of her loyalty to you, and I thought she would be important to help you find your way back home. But over time, I came to care for her – for her own sake.”

“You really... did all this for me? Killing the clan, defecting, rescuing Sakura?”

“I did. I could never have brought myself to wield the blade myself otherwise. I knew that nobody else that Danzō could send would care about your life.”

“Danzō. The elders. Itachi, how could you go back to the village with them still around? With what they ordered? What they knew about?”

Itachi felt his eyes shift into the Mangekyō instinctively, before he forced himself to extinguish it. He still felt tremendous rage towards the elders for how they’d manipulated him – Hokage-sama had

highlighted to him the various lies and half-truths that Danzō had told him, to push him towards deciding to carry out the massacre. “They have been dealt with,” Itachi said softly.

Sasuke swallowed and nodded, clearly getting his meaning. “I... I don’t know if I can ever look at you the same way again,” he admitted. “I don’t know if you and I can ever go back to the way we were. I don’t know if I can ever come back to Konoha. Not after what I did to Sakura.”

Itachi nodded, noting his implied apology. He could still feel some residual bitterness towards Sasuke – he hadn’t even really asked about Sakura’s welfare. Hadn’t asked about the child he’d killed.

But that could wait. There was ten years and more of resentment and anger between them to resolve. It would be the work of many more conversations to come. His hand drifted again to the cord around his neck.

The words he had to speak now were clearer than ever. Throwing caution to the wind, he pulled his little brother into an embrace, pressing their foreheads together.

“I know, Sasuke. I do not expect anything of you, nor do you ever have to forgive me. No matter what you choose, where you go, what you do from now on, I hope you will know this to be true. I will love you always.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been building towards the I WILL LOVE YOU ALWAYS for both Obito & Kakashi and Itachi & Sasuke for so LONG. It feels so satisfying to have that out in the world. I know a lot of people have been anticipating these confrontations, and I do hope the execution delivered!

For any fans of Brandon Sanderson's Stormlight Archive (please tell me if you are, I'm always excited to meet fellow fans), yes the Kakashi and Obito confrontation was directly inspired by Oathbringer's emotional climax.

Till next time, folks!

We Are Strong Together

Chapter Notes

This is the second-last time I'll be updating Prisoner of Fate! I'll be uploading both Chapter 36 and the epilogue together next week. I... can't believe we're almost at the end holy shit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The alarms blared as the very foundations of the village shook.

They were under attack.

Sakura felt the fear return – it was happening again, she was going to be captured again, there was nothing she could do –

Her hands grasped at the cord around her neck, and she forced herself to breathe in the pattern Shishou had taught her when they'd discussed Sakura's struggles the previous day.

"I couldn't stand the sight of blood," Shishou said quietly. "It was Naruto's courage that made me realize I had to stop running from my fear. After that, I taught myself to breathe through the tremors. And remind myself that I wasn't the same girl anymore, and that I had to at least try. To make Dan and Nawaki proud."

In for four counts, hold for four counts, out for six. It felt wrong to take the time to compose herself when the village was under attack, but this one minute would enable her to do what she needed to.

The blood that roared between her ears settled to a mere buzz, and her hands felt steady once more. And all the time, Itachi's chakra pulsed around her neck. *I'm with you*, it almost seemed to say. *I love you. I accept you. You are enough.*

She snatched up the seals she'd been working on, and her kunai and shuriken pouches. They'd dared to attack her home, and she'd be damned if anyone else had to go through the same fears and nightmares she'd had to suffer. She would protect her village, would ensure that children and civilians alike would not be haunted by the realization that nowhere was safe.

Sasuke pulled himself out of his brother's embrace. It was exactly

what he'd needed, and yet, it felt uncomfortable. As much as he'd loved his brother, all his memories entailed Itachi pushing him away. Not pulling him closer.

And now that the question of Itachi's true motivations was settled, they had other matters to attend to.

"Listen, Itachi – " he broke off as he saw his brother's lips press together, before his face relaxed back into its usual mask. Oh. Right.

"Aniki," he corrected, and Itachi's head rose up by a fraction. Had he ever thought his brother was hard to read? He must have been remarkably unobservant. "What do you know about that Zetsu fellow?"

Itachi frowned. "Zetsu? Why do you ask about him? He's just a spy."

"One of the team members I recruited from Orochimaru's people – Karin – she can sense chakra. That man, the one you said was Obito? She said Zetsu's chakra was malicious, and that it was infecting him in a similar way to how Orochimaru's chakra infected me whenever the curse seal spread."

Itachi's lips pursed again, though this time, it appeared more angry than disappointed. "We will need to deal with that cursed mark as well, though that will come in good time," he said. His eyes narrowed as he appeared to turn what Sasuke had told him over in his head. "Zetsu will need to be dealt with as well, then," he said finally. "He managed to maintain a remarkably low profile during my time with the Akatsuki – none of us suspected that he was anything more than what he appeared to be. That would indicate a degree of cunning that is... concerning."

"I tried asking Madara – Obito – whatever his name is where he'd be. He said Zetsu would just be moving about within the battlefield."

"You said your team member – Karin? – could sense his chakra?"

Sasuke nodded. He'd considered that as well, but Karin couldn't move fast enough to keep up with the sorts of speeds he'd noted Zetsu to be capable of. And besides, Zetsu could move *through* obstacles. Suigetsu could do that to some extent as well, but he needed to use pipes and vents to move his water – he couldn't just ignore matter the way Zetsu seemingly could.

"We'll need to find a way to connect her chakra to my crows," Itachi

muttered. "They can fly around, scout – "

"If you need help merging chakra, I can do that, believe it!" piped up a familiar voice. Sasuke whipped around to see... Naruto? At least, it looked like the idiot. Only, he was *glowing*.

"Naruto-kun – your battle with Pain is done? I did not sense any signatures," Itachi said. *Kun?* First Sakura, now Naruto – for all he knew, Itachi had probably become the best of friends with Kakashi too, Sasuke thought dourly.

"No, he's gone to Konoha. I got left here to tell you that the Pervy Sage and I went to Konoha to deal with him, but you guys seemed like you were having a moment, and I didn't want to interrupt," the clone said, scratching the back of his head.

"Thank you, Naruto-kun. You are able to merge chakra, you said?"

"Kurama says that he can give some of his chakra to whoever needs to be merged. It'll help connect them, apparently." He paused, and began yelling. "It's not like you've shown me before how it works! The hell do you mean, I'm too stupid to understand?"

Sasuke found himself rolling his eyes almost fondly. It appeared some things never changed. But at the very least, they had the beginnings of a plan to deal with the mystery that was Zetsu.

As she bolted out, Sakura noted that the village was organized, even within the chaos that was battle. Sure, there were chunks of rock and balls of flame flying everywhere, buildings crumbled to rubble. But the shinobi of Konoha were sticking to the roster she'd helped her shishou do up, to be used in the event of an emergency. In the couple of minutes Sakura had taken to gather her nerves and compose herself, the genin had already begun assisting with evacuating the civilians, the chuunin were defending the civilians from being hurt by stray debris and defending the essential infrastructure, and the jounin had begun taking on the invaders.

Konoha had been taken unaware by invaders once. Tsunade-shishou had decided that they never would be caught with their pants down ever again. She'd organized regular drills and roleplays and made damn sure that every ninja knew where they were supposed to be, with multiple contingencies accounting for the rotation of teams out on missions.

Sakura hopped from rooftop to rooftop, chakra senses extended. As a medic who was qualified in combat, Shishou had decreed that she would be wasted in the hospital. Instead, she was to rove around Konoha, looking for injured who might not have made it to the evacuation points, and take out any enemies she found along the way. She was also to provide emergency healing to any of the ninja who needed it until Shishou managed to activate the Network Healing jutsu. A duty that she was more than happy to fulfil.

She'd rescued an elderly man whose leg had been trapped under rubble, and two young children who had been trapped by fear, staring at the dead body of their mother, who had bled out before Sakura had found them. Her heart ached for them. She knew well what it was to lose a parent.

The thoughts that she *should have been faster* and that *the mother's death was on Sakura's hands* intruded, and she forced it aside by focusing her attention on her surroundings, and contemplating healing seals that would work for civilians. Her usual ones wouldn't work on them, since their chakra pathways were too underdeveloped to tap on. A complex set of seal equations would also be needed to ensure their pathways weren't fried –

It was at that moment that she saw Hinata being thrown against a wall like a rag doll. Sakura rushed ahead to help her. Which in hindsight was quite silly of her, since she was just thrown back too. She'd thankfully had the presence of mind to shield her back with chakra, so she didn't need to waste any on healing. She blinked, clearing her vision.

And saw Pain standing before her.

Her throat closed up, and she could feel pain in her chest, the blood gurgling up her throat, forced to wait on his whims before she could heal herself. Itachi's black eyes, boring into hers, so full of worry and fear that he masked with little success. Her relief – or was it Brainwashed Sakura's? Or both of theirs? – at the fact that she hadn't failed, or embarrassed Itachi.

No. No. She had to be strong. Had to stay in control of herself.

“Haruno Sakura,” Pain intoned. “Where is the traitor, Uchiha Itachi?”

“What makes you think I'd tell you anything?” she spat.

“Once I have the traitor in hand, I will leave your village in peace.”

“I would die before I told you where he was. I killed Konan protecting him, so don’t think I wouldn’t do the same to you!”

His eyes narrowed, and his gaze fixed itself upon her. “*You* killed Konan?”

Sakura shivered. He was leaking killing intent that could probably be felt a mile away. She realized she’d made a crucial mistake. Pain hadn’t been hunting Itachi for defecting. He was getting revenge for Konan’s death. And with her boast, she’d effectively made herself a target.

“You should not have told me that,” Pain said coolly. “Before, I would have killed you quickly. Now, though? You will know suffering, and you will know yourself for the insect that you are. You will know pain before you die.”

Sakura activated her yin seal just in time, as she was pulled forward and impaled on a rod that was where Pain’s arm should have been. Thankfully, she’d spent the ten days since her forced leave from the hospital aggressively rebuilding her chakra reserves.

As she felt the blood gurgling, her body desperately trying to heal the wound around the rod, the memories began to intrude again.

She tried desperately to hold on to the thoughts that this time was different, that she was stronger, but Pain’s soulless violet eyes, looking at her as if she was nothing more than the bothersome vermin as he’d named her, pushed those futile attempts aside. All her techniques – medical jutsu, her seals, her genjutsu – all of those were made to work on a living body.

What could she do against a corpse moved by chakra?

She *was* weak, she *was* nothing.

Her body slid off the rod and fell to the ground, and the Creation Rebirth jutsu began running, finally able to heal the wound.

Pain gazed at her dispassionately. “Interesting,” he mused. “A healing jutsu that works automatically, with no conscious input from you. Well, no matter. There must be a limit to the chakra that will sustain this jutsu. I will simply have to kill you again, and again, until you die like the rat you are. I will enjoy watching you suffer, Haruno Sakura, for what you have done.”

She didn't even have time to react before she was dragged onto the rod again.

There existed nothing except the pain of feeling her abdomen be pierced over and over, her insides knitting themselves together, only to go through it all over again.

Kakashi-sensei experienced this in Itachi's genjutsu for three days straight? It's a wonder he's still functional. But then, Kakashi-sensei was always stronger than me.

Through the haze of agony and fear, she felt a prodding at the edges of her mind. Ino. What was she doing here? Was she going to join Sakura in her torment? She told Inner Sakura to let Ino in. She should tell her not to waste her chakra –

"Sakura!" Ino's voice hissed in her mind. "Hinata says the rods are receiving chakra. We have no idea what that means, but the next time he stabs you, just try to yank them out. Hinata will be waiting to hit his tenketsu when he's distracted by dealing with you."

That activated a memory, and snapped her out of the spiral she'd been descending into. Itachi had known that there was a controller for Pain, and he'd known that the controller had used chakra rods to manipulate the bodies. But they'd never known enough about Pain's abilities to formulate a plan to disable the chakra rods.

"We do now. You and Hinata were the guinea pigs for that, which sucked, but we know he has that whole push-pull jutsu going on."

Hinata – is she okay?

"Yes, Sakura-san, I'm alright. Hokage-sama has sent out her slugs."

Oh, that was good. If Shishou had already activated the Network Healing jutsu, then Sakura could properly focus on the fight. As she slid off the chakra rod and slumped to the ground again, she forced herself to focus on her breathing, ridiculous as it felt.

In for four, hold for four, out for six.

"That's good, Forehead. And remember, you're not alone in this. I don't know how helpful I'll be, since this guy's a corpse and he doesn't have a mind I can invade, but I can help you and Hinata coordinate your attacks."

Coordinate... But for that, we'd need some kind of weak spot to hit. This guy can just keep on going.

"He might not be able to push and pull at the same time, Sakura-san. I'll test it the next time he moulds his chakra to pull you onto the rod. Once we figure out the limits of his jutsu, we can strategize how we're going to deal with him through Ino-san's mind-link."

"Forehead, you're going to have to continue being stabbed by him for a while for us to gather the information we need. Think you can handle that?"

This time was different. She wasn't alone. She wasn't just sitting around and waiting to die, waiting to be given permission to heal. She thought back again to the beautiful things Itachi told her – that her vulnerability was not weakness. That she had the strength to accept herself, to forgive herself for her weakness.

"You're not weak, Sakura-san. You don't have to beat him by yourself. We are with you. We form squads because we all have weak spots that we need teammates to cover. We live in villages so we can be strong together."

Hinata was right. Even Naruto and Sasuke had needed each other. Even Itachi had needed her to watch his back, to help him handle Sasori. There was a reason Kakashi-sensei's first lesson to them had been on the importance of teamwork.

She could not handle everything alone, but then, she should never have expected herself to.

The next time he pulled her onto the rod, Hinata launched a barrage of kunai. Sakura noticed with terror that he'd simply pushed the kunai away as well. As she felt the blood flowing again, she despaired. Was there no weakness to this monster?

"He dodged the first two! He only began pushing away the kunai after a few seconds. There must be a lag time after activating the jutsu where he needs to wait to activate it again! We've got this fucker!"

"It's a split-second, but I think I can hit a few of his tenketsu points at least. He'd still be able to release chakra through the other points though. Ino-san, would you be able to share my visualization of his chakra flows with Sakura-san? She might be able to hit some as well."

"You know I can."

Sakura took a deep breath, and waited for the next time Pain pulled her onto the rod. She wasn't practised in the Gentle Fist style, but she'd still give her all. At this point, anything she did would only help their situation.

I've been stabbed so many times already, and I survived every single time. I'm a shinobi, damn it! I'm not afraid of pain or Pain.

As she felt herself be pulled onto the rod again, she kept her focus on the mental cue Hinata had promised, rather than anticipating the searing agony that would come once the rod pierced her flesh. On Hinata's mental "Now!" she reached out and slammed her palms onto the points on his chest.

She didn't manage to close anywhere near as many as Hinata had managed on his back, but she'd still gotten about five, while Hinata had gotten twenty-two.

As she slid off the rod, the familiar warmth of her chakra knitting her skin back together, a thought occurred to her. Now what? It wasn't as if they could use the same move against Pain again. He wouldn't be stupid enough to keep stabbing her with the chakra rod when they'd already found a way to take advantage of it –

Sure enough, she found herself thrown back against the wall. She blinked, channelling healing chakra to her spine and skull. That had been *close*. Thankfully, her spinal cord hadn't been severed – the Creation Rebirth jutsu was amazing, but even that wouldn't be capable of reversing the instant death that would be caused by such an injury.

As she re-oriented herself, she realized that there were a few senbon lying on the ground. They surrounded Pain in a perfectly circular arc, but for a few gaps. Hinata had been *right*. That push-pull jutsu required him to emit chakra from every single tenketsu point. If they managed to disable enough of them, he'd be severely handicapped.

"Oh my god, Hinata, that was amazing! You can use senbon to close tenketsu too? And how did you know there would be a lag between pushes too?"

"I guessed that the lag was not for him to switch jutsu, but so that he could rest his pathways. It is good that the guess was correct. Thank you for bracing me so I didn't go flying off, Ino-san. Sakura-san, are you alright?"

I'm fine. Never better. I've got enough chakra to handle about five to six

more hits against the wall – think you guys can close enough of his tenketsu?

“We’re on it, Forehead. I’ve got to say – you have guts.”

At that moment, Sakura went flying backward again. But knowing that there was a plan allowed her to retain full control of her faculties despite the disorientation of being thrown. Which was how she was able to bear witness to the sudden appearance of what appeared to be a giant centipede and a giant ox, both with chakra rods embedded throughout their bodies.

No. The other Pain bodies showed up?

The animals engaged Ino and Hinata in battle, severing their mental connection once Ino was unable stay focused on maintaining it. Pain himself ignored the two and strode towards Sakura.

She could read her death in his eyes.

She felt tears prick the corner of her eyes as her hands grasped at the velvet cord around her neck.

Forgive me, Itachi. There will be no wedding for us.

This is it.

She forced herself to maintain eye contact with Pain even as the force of his push-pull jutsu repeatedly slammed her into a wall, even as she felt her chakra reserves recede to dangerously low levels. She was going to die here, yes, but she refused to become the terrified, weeping mess she’d been a few minutes ago. She’d die with her back straight and her eyes clear. She’d die as a version of herself her childhood self would have admired.

It seemed fate wasn’t done with her yet, though. For at the very moment that she expected to draw her final breath, a large chakra presence flared to life behind Pain, and a golden glow shot towards the earth like a meteor falling from the sky.

Pain whirled around to face the newcomer – no, two newcomers, Sakura realized, finally making out Naruto, and Jiraiya-sama behind him – finally putting his back to her.

Screaming, she shot towards him with all the speed she could muster. If she could just throw *one punch* at him with all her strength –

And found herself flying backwards again. *Idiot. You should have at least thrown a kunai first.* Before her back could impact the wall, though, there was a Naruto clone catching her, and gently placed her on her feet.

“Don’t worry, Sakura-chan,” the clone said, giving her a thumbs-up. “Pervy Sage and I will take care of this fellow.”

The old refrain of being too weak, of being constantly forced to watch her teammates’ backs, almost intruded, but was gently moved aside by a newer mantra.

We live in villages so we can be strong together.

“Got it, Naruto,” she said, pulling a grin onto her face. She would find other ways to support. “Kick his ass hard for me, yeah?”

“I will, believe it!”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to end the chapter at *"Forgive me, Itachi. There will be no wedding for us. This is it."*

Still feel like I should have HAHA

Given, Not Earned

Chapter Notes

Can't believe this is my last time posting for Prisoner of Fate :) It's been a long ten months, and I'm so glad this story has finally been told!

Naruto screamed, and felt Kurama try to hold him back.

Calm down, you brat. If you lose yourself in your anger, I will also be lost. I will be twisted by your rage. We would wreak devastation.

"I don't care!" Naruto roared. All the while, the *thing* wearing a human body stood before him, emotionless. Not showing the slightest hint of regret that he'd killed *his own sensei*.

This was the man responsible for destroying the village. Nagato, Pervy Sage had called him. The man who had caused Naruto to be *trapped* in Mount Myōboku for five years. The reason he had to sit back and wait instead of working towards his dream of becoming Hokage, or go looking for Sasuke and drag the bastard back. He ignored the knowledge he'd gotten from his clone that this man had been manipulated by both someone called Uchiha Obito and some black-and-white guy named Zetsu.

They hadn't made Nagato kill Pervy Sage. That had been his own decision. Pervy Sage had stretched out his hand, told him he was still his student, that he could still come back.

And the man had *killed him*. All so that Naruto would know pain.

A corner of his mind whispered to him that this was wrong, that he shouldn't twist Kurama and use him in this way. But he'd been fighting Nagato for days, and nothing else had worked – he had the ability to absorb ninjutsu, he had techniques and summons to protect him against taijutsu, and Naruto had never had any abilities in genjutsu.

The only way to make him pay for what he'd done was to overwhelm him with sheer power.

Naruto screamed again, shoving Kurama's voice down, squeezing every inch of power he could out of him. He needed no jutsu for this.

Pure chakra was enough.

Everything was surrounded by a golden flare before his vision went dark.

That chakra.

It was a different signature from the one that had destroyed the infrastructure of the village, when Pain had suddenly left in the middle of his battle with Naruto and Jiraiya-sama.

Yet, this was no less malevolent. No less intent on destruction.

Sakura shivered as she thought through the implications.

A different chakra signature from Pain's – that meant it was Naruto's, or Jiraiya-sama's. She'd guess Naruto's from the magnitude of it.

He must have been overwhelmed by the Kyuubi.

She dropped the pile of timber she'd been carrying, and bolted in the direction of the chakra flare. Protocol demanded that she wait for Shikaku-sama, the nominated leader of the interim council for the duration of her shishou's convalescence, to issue a mission to investigate the flare. But instinct, drummed into her by Kakashi-sensei – *those who leave their comrades behind are worse than trash* – demanded she go immediately.

That chakra.

It was the same chakra Itachi had sensed on the day the Kyuubi had been unleashed upon the village. The day that had begun the avalanche that had led to the Uchiha massacre.

The Kyuubi must have gotten loose. But *how*? In all the time Itachi had spent with Naruto-kun, he had appeared to be in control. He'd gone so far as to explain to Itachi that he had reached an accord with the Kyuubi – and that his name was Kurama.

He glanced at Sasuke, whose face had gone pale.

"That chakra..." he whispered. "The idiot – he's lost control."

It appeared that the battle wasn't finished yet. But Itachi knew that he was spent. He'd used the Totsuka blade embedded within his Susano'o

to seal Zetsu away, and they had all immediately set a hard pace toward Konoha. He had not had the time to recover fully – not for a confrontation of the magnitude that dealing with the Kyuubi would certainly require.

Glancing at their entourage and their stricken looks, Itachi made a split-second decision. Naruto-kun had trusted him to handle Sasuke. He, in turn, would pass that on.

He only hoped he wasn't making a grave error.

"Senpai," he said. "I will take charge of returning Obito to the village. Take Sasuke with you."

Sasuke's head whipped to glance at him, his face covered in unadulterated shock. "Nii-san – you –"

"You know him better than I. You are better equipped to handle him than I," Itachi said, heart pounding, hoping he wasn't making a mistake. Hoping Sasuke wouldn't run off once out of his sight.

Hoping that Sakura was alright, even though he recognized that his love would not be far when someone she cared for was in distress. *Someone* had to take responsibility for Obito. And as much as every instinct within him screamed to be the one leading the detour to check on Naruto-kun, to ensure Sakura was not anywhere that chakra flare, he could not deny that Kakashi was a better choice – both in terms of his available chakra, and his familiarity with Naruto-kun.

Kakashi nodded. Sasuke paused. "If Obito wakes, you'll be able to handle him?"

Itachi tried not to let his irritation show, and instead allowed his eyes to shift into the Mangekyō. "I will," he said, unable to keep some measure of curtness from his tone. Sasuke had watched him seal away a primal being who claimed to be the child of a moon goddess, and he wondered if Itachi could handle one unconscious nin? He was not *that* low on chakra.

Sasuke nodded, and turned to his team. "Taka, you'll be with me," he ordered. "Suigetsu, scout ahead. Karin and Juugo, I want you to keep your senses peeled. Let me know if you sense any further abnormalities in chakra or nature energy."

Kakashi, meanwhile, nodded at Itachi. That simple gesture told him more than enough. It conveyed Kakashi's gratitude that he wouldn't

have to make an impossible choice between attending to a precious person in danger or completing the mission as protocol demanded.

One moment, Sakura was striding through the forests that surrounded Konoha. The next, she was standing on the edge of a crater that stretched as far as her eye could see.

And in the middle of that crater lay a body.

Naruto.

Chest tight, she ran with everything she had, cursing herself for not pausing to pick up her healing seals. No matter – she'd simply draw them in his blood. Itachi had managed to make that work when she'd been knocked unconscious –

She stopped short on reaching Naruto. He lay still, staring into the sky with dull eyes, but unmistakably awake, and unmistakably himself. There was no trace of the Kyuubi's presence as far as her own limited chakra senses could detect.

"Naruto?" she asked softly, extending her hand to touch him, and hesitated when he didn't give any indication of having heard her. What if he reacted poorly to the touch?

She heard a sound of scrabbling stones, and looked up to see Kakashi-sensei running towards them, trailed by Sasuke and three others she couldn't recognize.

Itachi wasn't with them.

"No," she whispered. She'd survived, but for what? Naruto was practically catatonic, and Itachi was –

She didn't want to think it. It couldn't be true.

"You moron!" Sasuke snapped, getting to his knees next to Naruto's prone body. With none of Sakura's hesitation or care, he grabbed Naruto's shoulders and shook him. "What was that? We thought the Kyuubi was loose!"

She ignored them, and turned to Kakashi-sensei with her heart in her eyes.

"Where's Itachi?" she asked quietly, praying he was alright, that there was some other explanation. She was having a hard enough time

looking at Sasuke, knowing he'd killed her child, even though it had been her fault as well as his. If he'd killed Itachi too...

"On the way back to Konoha. Obito needed to be secured," Kakashi-sensei replied, his lone gray eye focusing on her. She sagged, feeling like a terrible friend. She hadn't spared a thought for Naruto in the intervening minutes since she'd caught sight of them.

Feeling like an imposter, she leaned forward and performed a quick diagnostic scan on Naruto. It was the first thing she should have done, really. And she would have, if she hadn't been distracted – first by the sight of Sasuke, and then by Itachi's absence.

She sighed, pulling her hand away. Naruto was fine. There was no sign of Pain, so what –

Her breath caught. Jiraiya-sama was missing too.

She finally identified the emptiness in Naruto's eyes – it was one she had seen almost everyday in the mirror after her father's death, after all.

"Kami," she breathed. "Naruto, I'm so sorry for your loss."

Hollow words. She knew well enough how little those words would soothe. She could very well guess what had happened – Jiraiya-sama must have been killed, or had his life threatened, to make Naruto lose control like that. She could only hope Pain truly had been killed in the resulting explosion, that they were safe to attend to Naruto's emotions above all else.

She reached out and gripped his hand tight, all reservations forgotten. He would need people. He'd been alone before, she knew, from the stories he'd told her about his upbringing – or lack thereof. A loss like this would hit him even harder than it had her, who'd had a relatively robust support system of friends and other loved ones.

"Idiot, say something," Sasuke snarled. She could have slapped him. Did he really think crude language and violence was the answer to everything? Meanwhile, Kakashi-sensei hovered behind them like a mother hen, fingers twisting in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. All three of them, there for the boy they loved, but none of them possessing the words to reach him. And the three behind them, who watched the perimeter, and occasionally turned to shoot anxious looks at Sasuke. He'd found a new team, had he? *Good* for him. She could almost wonder that he even bothered being there for Naruto.

"I killed him," Naruto said softly after what felt like hours, his voice hoarse. Sakura tensed. Surely, he was referring to Pain? She hoped he wasn't talking about Jiraiya.

"He was Pervy Sage's student. And he killed him. And he said I would shut up if I understood the real nature of pain."

Sakura's heart clenched. Pain did have a way of getting in one's head. She could still hear his eerie voice, whispering to her that she would die like a rat.

Naruto's voice cracked. "If only – if only I'd killed him first. If I hadn't held back, and let Pervy Sage try to talk to him. He might still be here." Sakura desperately wanted to reassure him, but she held her words. She sensed that he wasn't yet done.

Naruto yanked his hand out of Sakura's with uncharacteristic force and slammed his hand into the ground. She steeled herself, expecting to be thrown back, but there was no force behind the blow. He hadn't used chakra.

"I killed him. I wrung Kurama dry of chakra, and I threw it all at him. Pervy Sage told me to be careful before. He said taking in too much chakra would fry my circuits and kill me. And I thought, that should be the same for that bastard too. So I did it. Kurama begged me not to. He begged me not to lose myself to the anger, and I just didn't *listen*."

Naruto began sobbing in earnest at that point. Sakura pulled him into her arms, patting him on the back. "It's okay, Naruto," she murmured. "You did what you could in the moment."

Naruto wrenched himself out of her grip and turned away. "I didn't!" he screamed. "You don't understand! Kurama *told* me I'd destroy everything if I let the anger take me over, and I didn't listen! I should have found another way! I hurt Kurama, and I could have hurt so many other people. But I didn't care. I – I just wanted him to make him hurt. I can't ever be Hokage."

Her heart broke for Naruto. He'd spoken of little else except being Hokage since the day she'd met him. For him to react this way...

"Sakura was pregnant," Sasuke suddenly said. She whipped around and levelled a glare at him. He of all people had no right to bring that up, and now *really* wasn't the time. Ignoring the daggers she was shooting at him, he went on. "I found out about it when I was fighting Itachi. And the anger just took over me, and I... I attacked Sakura."

Aimed Chidori right at her womb.”

Silence fell, as Kakashi-sensei and Naruto both regarded Sasuke with identical looks of horror. Naruto’s head whipped around to look at Sakura. “Sakura-chan, are you still – ”

She shook her head. “It’s dead,” she said flatly. Her hand curled around her womb, even though it was pointless, even though she knew there was nothing there. It hurt, to have to refer to her child as an *it*. But it wasn’t as if her baby had survived long enough for her to know its gender.

Sasuke nodded, his eyes downcast. She felt a savage joy course through her. *Good*. Let him feel the impact of what he’d done.

“I killed Itachi’s and Sakura’s baby,” Sasuke repeated. “It wasn’t even a stranger, like this guy was. It wasn’t even someone who was threatening me or the people I loved. It was a baby. Helpless. Innocent. But Itachi still... He still forgave me.”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed. He’d done *what*? She was going to have a pointed conversation with Itachi later.

And yet... Wasn’t that just so characteristic of Itachi? To take all the world’s blame and hatred onto himself? How many times had she spat cruel words at him, not caring how they hurt him? And each time, he’d forgiven her without so much as a blink of the eye.

“Great. So he doesn’t think you’re a screw-up of a brother. And?” Naruto asked listlessly.

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Way to miss the point, moron. Listen, if Itachi could forgive me for killing his *unborn baby*, then why the hell do you think you’re so irredeemable? You killed an enemy of the village. After he killed someone you loved right in front of your eyes. Who knows what else he might have done? If you hadn’t stopped him, he might have killed *you*. He might have gone on to kill the rest of the village. You did the very thing that will probably get you made Hokage, and you choose *now* to decide you’re not fit for it anymore?”

In spite of herself, Sakura felt a tear prick at the corner of her eyes. It was – it was the old Sasuke. The one who’d constantly protected her and Naruto. The one who’d thanked her when she had tried to stop him from leaving the village. She’d told herself she’d never forgive him for what he’d done, but his gruff, honest words were cracking the shell she’d erected around her heart.

He was still her teammate, whom she'd loved. Whom she still loved, despite everything he had done. That was why it hurt so much.

"I left my teammate behind to die," Kakashi-sensei said suddenly. Three faces turned to look at him.

"*Kakashi-sensei! You took off your mask?*" Naruto screamed. Sasuke's jaw had dropped, and Sakura was sure she was wearing a similarly gobsmacked expression. She would scarcely have been more shocked if he'd removed all his clothes and was parading around naked.

"It was Obito. The one who gave me my Sharingan. I left him behind for dead. And later, he found out that our third teammate died by impaling herself on my Chidori so that she couldn't be used against the village. He's the one who manipulated Pain. Who turned him into a terrorist." Kakashi-sensei paused, and pulled his mask back on. His shoulders immediately relaxed. "Tsunade-sama, for some reason, still thinks I will make an adequate Hokage until you are ready to take the reins. All I can do now is keep trying to do better."

Sakura sighed. She didn't really want to, but if they were all doing this confessional, she was pretty much obligated to participate. "I killed Konan. One of the members of the Akatsuki," she clarified, on seeing Naruto's confused expression. "She was already unconscious then. She was completely defenceless. But Itachi was also there and he was near death, and she'd already threatened to kill him once. So I shoved poison down her throat. That's the reason Pain was so angry. I was an idiot. I told him I'm the one who killed Konan. He was getting revenge."

Sasuke cleared his throat, looking discomfited. "We're *shinobi*, idiot. All of us have made choices that resulted in death. Hell, Itachi killed my entire clan. I'm still not sure I forgive him for that, and for torturing me. But he's trying. And that's what matters. And besides, weren't you the one that lectured Neji into changing his mind about destiny and fate and all that bullshit? How can you give up now?"

"You *know* about that? How?" Naruto demanded.

Sasuke rolled his eyes once again. "I was stuck in the same hospital room as him after the chuunin exams," he muttered. "He wouldn't shut up about how you'd shown him a new way. Going on and on about how we always have choices, how it's never too late to change your fate."

Sakura suddenly felt a laugh bubble up from her belly. It was *alright*,

they would all be okay. Hearing their confessions, it occurred to her that the ones who featured in her nightmares were all gone. Akatsuki was completely destroyed. Itachi was back, and he was safe. Naruto was suffering, but with his perpetually sunny outlook, she was sure he'd recover with time.

And Sasuke...

Almost on impulse, she threw her arms around him, catching him by surprise. "What are you doing?" he grumbled, but there was no real bite behind it.

"I forgive you," she said.

She wasn't entirely sure about that decision, but it was well worth saying it just to see how his eyes widened and his jaw dropped yet again. She made sure to memorize how it looked – she'd recreate it for Itachi later in a genjutsu.

"You what?" he sputtered.

"I forgive you," she repeated. "Both for my baby, and for stabbing me."

"You stabbed Sakura-chan?"

"I didn't mean it – "

"How the hell do you stab someone by *accident*, bastard?"

"I didn't say it was an accident, idiot, I just said that I didn't mean it – "

Sakura lay back against the hard ground, rocks digging into her back, feeling the laughter course through her. It was just like old times again. Kakashi-sensei even had his copy of Icha Icha open in front of him, though there was a twinkle in his eye which told her that he knew *exactly* what he was doing.

After Naruto and Sasuke had finished throwing punches at each other – it had been *ten years* and they were still doing exactly the same thing – Sasuke flopped down on the ground next to her. "Did you mean it?" he asked, his voice low. "About forgiving me? I know I don't deserve it."

Those words. That acknowledgement of what he'd done to her. It was

the first time he'd even come close to an apology, she realized. It eased the sting she'd felt since the moment she'd cast eyes on him again, leeching the last remnants of the poison that was resentment from her heart.

"You probably don't," she acknowledged. "But I don't know if it's ever possible to be *worthy* of forgiveness. It's not something that's earned. It's given. And I..." Her hand wandered again to her betrothal necklace, stroking it. This time, with love and affection, rather than fear of losing something she held dear. "Itachi loves you," she said finally. "And I love him. I don't want to make him choose between us. I don't know how long it will take for me to really become okay with you again. But I promise I'll try."

Their eyes met, and she realized that she felt nothing at his intense gaze. She truly had grown up. And she was ready to at least try to let go of everything – the pain of his constant rejections, the sting of betrayal, the insidious whisper that she was never enough.

All that remained within her was a bonfire of love for her precious people, burning bright. This wasn't the end of unhappiness, not by a long shot, but it was the beginning of a new chapter of her life.

And for today, that was enough.

Epilogue: That They Lived

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Itachi held the bundle in his arms, hearing the soft coos of his infant daughter as he walked. The smile that now almost permanently graced his face bloomed even brighter.

They reached a bush at the far edge of the Uchiha Memorial Gardens, where blossomed the white chrysanthemums. “This,” he said softly, “is where we remember your oldest sister. Hanako. She never even really knew life, but even in those few days of her existence, she was our miracle. She changed everything.” He paused, and placed a kiss to his daughter’s forehead, lest she think she was unfavourably compared to her sister.

Itachi would never admit to loving any of his children more than any of the others, and his sons, Kizashi and Shisui, were more precious than life itself to him, rambunctious rascals though they were. But little Aiko – the daughter he’d longed for, who had inherited Sakura’s beautiful jade eyes – she held his heart in her tiny hands.

“Never fret, Aiko-chan,” he murmured. “You are our miracle too.”

She gurgled happily, almost as if she could understand him. He continued to walk her around the gardens, pointing out the various plants he’d chosen, and the reasons they had been chosen. Many of the plants were medicinal, in tribute not only to how Sakura’s healing jutsus had saved both their lives and made their little family possible, but also in hopes that the Uchiha would become known as a clan of healers.

He spoke to her of love, of sacrifice, of remembrance. She would never know any of her grandparents, but Itachi and Sakura would both pass their stories down. They would tell them over and over, until all who had gone before them were firmly ensconced in their family’s collective memory.

They made their way to the centre of the gardens, where he’d had the cherry blossom trees planted. The boughs of pastel pink blooms in their splendour swayed gently in the balmy spring breeze. It was truly a magnificent sight.

"I planted these trees for Kaa-chan," he told Aiko. "I had never dared to dream that I could be happy. I never thought my heart could hold love for more than one person. But your kaa-chan, she showed me that I was wrong. She taught me that I could love so many people. Even myself."

He smiled fondly at those memories, of egotism and suspicion, but also of curiosity and admiration. "I am a very lucky man," he went on. "Your kaa-chan loved Sasuke-oji first." Before he could continue, his daughter gurgled and turned her head curiously.

"You want to see Sasuke-oji again?" He knew she was too young to truly understand his speech, but he could have sworn she nodded. "He'll be back soon, don't worry. And your Naruto-oji too. They'll finish up this last diplomatic mission, and they'll come back so Naruto-oji can be inaugurated as the Hokage. And then, maybe they'll actually stay put in Konoha for a while."

His long speech seemed to have tired her out, for she stretched her arms and yawned. "I suppose it's time to go home," he chuckled. Sakura would be due back from the hospital soon, and he wanted to have a hot meal ready and waiting for her when she did.

"Talking to your daughter again, Itachi?" a familiar voice teased. "You do know that she's not going to really understand language for months yet, right? And with the way you talk, she probably won't understand *you* until she's an adult."

"Ino-san," he greeted, shifting Aiko a little so he could raise his hand to wave. "Will you be visiting soon? Sakura misses your company."

Ino-san rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, tell her it's her own damn fault! If she's not spending all her time at the hospital, she's helping you restore the Uchiha clan. Not that I blame her, mind you," she said, wiggling her eyebrows. Itachi felt his cheeks flush slightly. It had been fourteen years, and he still had yet to get used to the way she teased. It didn't help that she and Sakura had once gotten extremely intoxicated, and Sakura had expounded on certain intimate details of his anatomy in great detail. Ino-san had not let up on the teasing since.

Fortunately, fate took pity on him that day, and she was distracted by a regular customer of Yamanaka Flowers, and he took the opportunity to make his escape.

As he walked toward their family home, he was greeted by the

passers-by who recognized him. And there were many of them – after all, he was the husband of the Director of the Konoha Hospital, the woman who had revolutionized healing and medicine with her seal-craft.

The mistrustful whispers that had followed him when he had first returned to the village had died down a long time ago – all it had taken was time, and watching his sons run him ragged as he attempted to keep them from destroying the village while he bought the groceries.

After all, no one could really continue to insist that a hapless father who took all his sons' antics with grace and good humour was a psychopathic murderer. In hindsight, he and Sakura had probably brought it on themselves with whom they had named the boys after. One would think that they would have learned their lesson with Kizashi, but when Shisui arrived four years later, husband and wife had both proven that they had highly selective memories indeed.

"You won't give your otou-chan so much trouble, will you, Aiko-chan?" he said softly, not wanting to disturb her rest. "You won't pull Otou-chan's hair and get gum in it so he has to cut it, and you won't break food stands and make all the shopkeepers angry, isn't that right?"

There was no answer, as expected. But he knew that even if she got into mischief like her older brothers, she would only need to smile at him, and he would be lost.

After all, her mother's smile did the exact same thing to him.

The house was empty when they entered. Shisui was having dinner at Tsunade-sama's home – she was extremely fond of the child she insisted would surpass both her and Sakura one day – and Kizashi's genin team was still on their first mission out of the village. He sighed to himself as he put Aiko-chan down in her crib, and began preparing dinner. They all grew up so quickly. It almost felt like no time had passed at all since they'd found out that Sakura was pregnant with Kizashi, and now, the boy was old enough to begin going on missions himself.

He worried, of course. He always did, especially knowing first-hand how missions could go wrong. He prayed every day that his son would return home safely, and that he would grow to adulthood and continue to find joy in life as so many children of generations before

had never been able to.

His fingers drifted to the metal around his throat, warmed by the heat of his flesh. He felt the familiar grooves of a crow in flight holding a cherry blossom, and felt it return warmth to him – a warmth of faith, of love, of trust. A warmth that Sakura had taught him, and which he tried his utmost to pass on to their children.

There were few things capable of causing Itachi fear, and losing his precious people was one of them. But he was no longer alone. With the ones he loved by his side, he knew he could overcome anything.

~ The End ~

Chapter End Notes

It's been an amazing ride. I'm so full of feelings right now because this is my first time ever finishing a story. So much thanks and love to everyone who has commented, bookmarked, and kudoed this story - especially my faithful readers who commented on every single chapter. Y'all are the best, and you're the reason this story is finished!

Do connect with me on [Tumblr](#) and [Twitter](#) - we can yell about literally anything in the world together HEHE

End Notes

If you enjoyed this story, do leave a comment - they're like cookies for my tired brain! Keyboard smashes and emotes are welcome, and if you leave me an "ok noted" i will actually laugh. Constructive criticism is welcome as well, but please be kind!

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